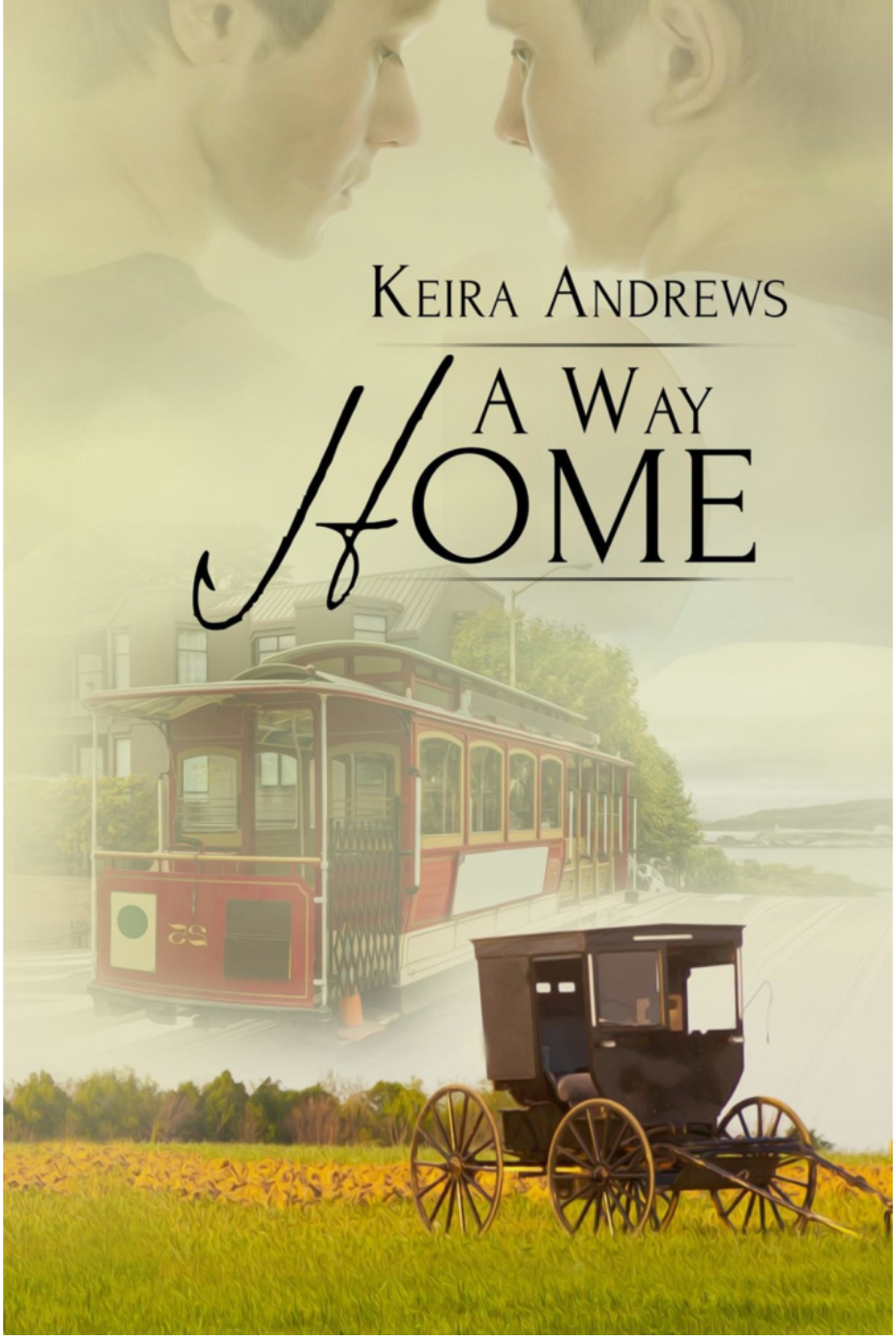
KEIRA ANDREWS
A WAY HOME

PART ONE

Chapter One

"Do I look okay?"

As Isaac glanced at Aaron, he stepped in a pile of slush that soaked straight through his sneaker. It was the end of April, but the vestiges of winter still clung to northern Minnesota, and melting snowbanks dotted the hospital parking lot. Aaron stopped and smoothed a hand down his jacket. It was a nice raincoat—the color of red wine, fitted with buttons down the front—but they both knew it didn't matter.

Still, Isaac nodded. "You look great."

Aaron tried to smile. "Thanks." He pushed back a lock of blond hair that had crept over his forehead, and pushed a button to lock the doors on the salt-stained sedan he'd rented at the airport.

The truth was that Aaron could be wearing his fanciest suit, but the only way to please their parents was if he donned plain clothes again—clothes that followed the rules of the *Ordnung* down to the very last detail. Isaac wasn't wearing Amish clothes either, and he realized it would be the first time his parents would see him in English jeans and a hoodie. His green raincoat was thin, and he shivered, wishing he had gloves.

Maybe he should have changed into his Amish clothes after all. Mother and Father would hate to see him like this, but he'd wanted to…what? Make a statement, he supposed. But what was he really saying? Was it brave to spit in his parents' faces and turn his back on his heritage? Or cruel?

Isaac tugged at his sleeves and scuffed his rubber toe across the wet concrete. Driving from Minneapolis had taken longer than he'd expected, and it would be dark soon. If he asked Aaron to go back to June's now so he could change, the nurses might not even let him see Nathan by the time they returned.

They stood by the car, breath clouding the damp, wintry air, and stared at the gray and beige concrete block that was the hospital. The glass doors of the emergency room *swished* open and shut as a nurse in blue scrubs came out. She lit a cigarette as she walked away from the door, joining a man in a wheelchair with a metal pole holding a plastic bag towering over him. The nurse exhaled a cloud of smoke and rubbed her arms.

"I guess we should go inside." Aaron stared at the doors with hunched shoulders.

"Yeah."

Neither of them moved. They'd been so desperate to get to

Minnesota after the nurse had called. Mother and Father refused to come on the line, and she could only tell them so much. Nathan had cancer. He probably needed some kind of transplant. Could they be tested?

Now, standing in the slushy parking lot of the hospital under a gray slate sky, Isaac felt just as far away as he had in San Francisco. *Nathan has cancer.* The terror that his brother would die before Isaac could see him again had driven him here as though he were a horse kicked by a merciless rider. Not being able to speak to Nathan or their parents had been torture.

Yet now that he and Aaron had arrived, Isaac's stomach churned. A vision of blood soaking into the fresh white snow filled his mind, and David's voice echoed.

"I must repent or my mother will die. Everyone I love will pay for my sins. You need to stay far away from me."

Isaac swallowed hard over a swell of emotion. They'd come so far together, but somehow not far enough. David hadn't answered his calls and texts about Nathan. Why hadn't he? The ache to have David by his side burned hollowly in Isaac's chest. Isaac had been so afraid not to come back to Minnesota straight away, and now he couldn't face actually going inside. He itched to clutch David's hand and feel his warm, solid strength.

"David's coming tomorrow."

Isaac blinked at his brother, his pulse jumping. *Was I talking out loud?* "What?"

Aaron held up his phone. "Jen's taking him to the airport first thing. The redeye was booked, but he'll be in Minneapolis by early afternoon."

The surge of sweet relief was tempered by dark tendrils of disappointment and hurt. He wished he could scrub his brain and erase the image of David in that place. The image of Clark touching him. *Kissing* him. Kissing *his* David! Isaac's mind whirled uselessly. "Oh."

Aaron's eyebrows shot up. "*Oh*? That's it? Okay, tell me what happened. I know you don't want to, but before we go in there and deal with all…*that*, we need to deal with this. Spill it. What did you guys fight about?"

Sighing, Isaac jammed his hands in his coat pockets. His face flushed, and he wasn't sure if it was with anger or embarrassment. "He kissed someone else," Isaac mumbled. He hated even saying the ugly words.

"*What*?" Aaron's jaw opened and closed. "Are you serious? Of course you're serious—forget I said that. What happened?"

Isaac kept his gaze on a scattering of rock salt. "I saw them

kissing at the dance club. David didn't think I'd be there, but I got a fake ID. I was going to surprise him." He laughed hollowly. "Didn't turn out how I expected."

"I… Wow. I really can't believe this. It doesn't seem like David at all. He's so in love with you. I mean, when he looks at you little cartoon hearts spring out of his eyes."

"Really? You think so?" Isaac blinked rapidly to fight impending tears, and breathed carefully. "Then why? I guess Clark has something I don't," he muttered.

"*Clark*?" Isaac nodded, and Aaron pressed his lips together. "I can't believe this. I'm going to kill him. Both of them! What did David say?"

"He said Clark kissed him like I saw, and that he tried to get away from him, but Clark followed. I saw them go into the bathroom together. David says nothing happened. " Isaac inhaled through the wave of nausea. "But I know what people do in there."

Aaron's gaze narrowed. "Wait—David says nothing really happened?"

"I want to believe him, but…I can't get it out of my head, seeing them together. It makes me so angry and…sick. Sick to my stomach. I should have known. I heard Clark say that he was going to get David into bed the first night we met him."

Jaw clenched, Aaron shook his head. "Well, that I can certainly believe. I love Clark, but he can be a selfish ass sometimes. But David? I don't know. He's never struck me as a liar, Isaac."

"But we lied to our families and everyone we knew for months. We're *still* lying to them." He jabbed his finger toward the hospital. "I'm going to go in there and *lie*. Because it's bad enough I betrayed God and my community by leaving. But if they found out who I really am? It would be over for good. No visiting. No letters. Nothing."

Aaron sighed. "Isaac, when was the last time you got a letter? The only way they'll ever let you back in their lives is if you repent your evil, worldly ways, come home, and join the church. Whether or not they know you're gay won't really matter in the end. Yes, you're right—if they find out, they'll turn away from you. Right now you're not shunned like I am, but you'll never have a real relationship with them. Not unless you go back and do everything they want. Give up everything you have. Everything you *are*."

It was all true, but Isaac still shook his head. "I can't tell them the truth. They can't ever know."

"I'm not suggesting you should march in there and come out." Aaron took Isaac's shoulders gently. "Just that you should think about how far you're willing to go to keep that shred of hope alive. How much of yourself you're willing to give up, and for what? Maybe a

letter or two a year if you're lucky?"

"It's better than nothing," Isaac whispered.

Aaron smiled sadly. "Maybe. And yes, you're right that you and David have lied about who you are, and the truth of your relationship. But don't hold that against him now. It's not fair. Hear him out. Has he ever lied to you before?"

"No. I don't know. I don't think so. How am I supposed to know?" That was what dug into him the most with sharp, angry edges—that he wasn't sure of anything now. Had David lied to him in the past? Isaac's heart said no, but maybe he was fooling himself?

"I know you're hurt and angry, and you have every right to be. Just don't make any big decisions right now. Whatever happens in the end, I support you, but don't give up on your relationship with David without really talking with him. He's a good person. You both are. You can work through this. I know you can."

He nodded. Part of him wanted to tell Aaron that David had apparently been lying about drinking as well, but the words wouldn't come. He didn't have a clue what to think about that. About any of it. He wanted so desperately to believe David had never wanted anything to happen with Clark, but he didn't want to be…what was the word Chris had used? *A chump.* It was as though Isaac's feeling were a big pot of stew inside him, stirring and stirring and stirring. It wouldn't be long until it all overflowed.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed. Heart in his throat, Isaac pulled it out and read the words on the screen.

I will be there soon. I love you.

He exhaled shakily, the jagged edge of his panic dulling as warmth flowed through him. As hurt as he was, he knew David truly loved him. If that made him a chump, so be it. There was so much he wanted to say, but it would have to wait. It was better to talk in person, especially since David barely knew how to use his phone even after months.

"I guess we really should get in there." Aaron blew out a long breath. "It's easy to give you advice, but not so easy to take it myself. I know I shouldn't get my hopes up. They might not even look at me, let alone talk to me. God, it's been so long. Almost ten years now. Hard to believe, isn't it? Seeing them again, it's…terrifying. But exciting too."

Isaac squeezed Aaron's arm. "I'm here. We'll do it together."

On the other side of the lot, a large delivery truck rumbled away, revealing a horse and covered buggy hitched to a light post. Isaac's heart skipped a beat as he recognized old Roy right away. He thought of dear Silver, and hoped he'd see her again soon. Looking at the buggy, it hit home—Mother and Father were really inside, and so was

Nathan. His little brother was in there, lying in a bed not knowing if he'd live or die, and here Isaac was worrying about himself.

Without another word, they hurried across the lot, almost in a run by the time the glass doors *swooshed* open to admit them to whatever might wait inside.

#

Although he was used to electricity now, the florescent lights of the hospital still seemed too bright. The gray floors were the same, and as he and Aaron took the elevator to the third floor and walked down a long hallway, Isaac's sneakers squeaked. He looked at the numbers as they passed, his heart beating harder as they got closer. A familiar dark-skinned woman in green scrubs walked out of a room and scribbled something on a chart before popping it in its plastic holder on the wall.

She glanced up and smiled brightly. "Isaac? Is that you?"

He managed a smile. "Yes. Hello. This is my brother, Aaron."

"Hi." Danielle extended her hand to Aaron before squeezing Isaac's arm. "Wow. You look different."

"I guess I do." Isaac glanced around uneasily. "You look different too." He waved his hand in the general direction of her belly.

"Yep." She laughed and patted her flat stomach. "Had a little girl a few months ago. I'll bore you with pictures later." Her smile faded. "I'm glad you both could come."

"How is he?" Aaron asked.

"Hanging in there. They're testing everyone in the family to see if there's a match, but no luck so far. If you can donate bone marrow that could help him a lot. Nathan's sleeping, so I'm afraid you can't talk to him right now. He had some more tests, and he'll be out for the rest of the night, probably. We'll get your samples to send to the lab at the Mayo for HLA typing after you say hi to your parents."

Say hi. She made it sound so easy. Isaac wasn't sure what HLA meant, but didn't bother asking. As long as it could help Nathan get better, that was all that mattered. "He's feeling all right?"

She grimaced. "I'm not going to lie—he's in pain. He's doing a course of high-dose chemo and radiation. It's tough."

Isaac wasn't quite sure what those things were, but before he could ask, Mother appeared in a doorway near the end of the hall, about twenty feet away. Frozen in her tracks, she stared, and Isaac choked down a sudden sob that threatened. He wanted to run to her and have her hold him the way she did in this hospital after Mrs. Lantz's accident, when she'd been so worried for him. Was she still worried? Did she still care? Isaac's throat went dry, and he glanced at Aaron.

"Let me…can I talk to them for a minute?" Aaron asked. "If

they'll talk to me, that is."

Isaac nodded, and watched him walk down the rest of the hall. How strange it was to see Aaron and Mother in the same place again.

"You've been staying with your brother?" Danielle smiled kindly.

"Yes. In San Francisco. He left years ago."

"How was the trip? Was that the first time you've flown?"

He nodded, eyes glued to Mother, willing her to look his way again. "Flying was…weird. A little scary, but Aaron was with me." It was difficult to even believe that yesterday he'd been all the way in San Francisco, and today he was back in Minnesota. He'd followed Aaron at the airport and did what he said, and wished he could have enjoyed the experience, but he'd only felt numb. Maybe if David had been there… But now he was on his way, at least. *What will we say to each other? Is everything ruined? What would I do without him?*

"You okay?" Danielle took his shoulder. "You look like you might throw up." She put the back of her hand to his forehead.

"I'm fine." He gulped in a breath and watched Aaron and Mother face each other.

"How does it work?" Danielle frowned as she followed his gaze. "I've heard of shunning, but I don't know what's real and what's made up for TV."

"Um, it's…" Isaac trailed off.

Father joined Mother just outside the room, standing ramrod straight. Tears pricked Isaac's eyes as he watched his parents. It had only been months, but they looked older. The gray from the beard that hung from Father's chin had made its way over his head, weaving through his thatch of dark hair. Father gripped his black hat in his hands. Mother's long dark dress hung off her thinner frame, and Isaac suspected that under her cap and heavy bonnet, her blonde hair might have its own hint of gray.

Aaron was speaking, and at least Mother and Father were listening, albeit with tight expressions. Mother's gaze was locked on the floor. Isaac remembered that Danielle had asked a question. "Aaron had been baptized before he left, so he's been excommunicated. He's shunned. *Meidung*, it's called."

"Excommunicated," she repeated. "So it's an official thing?"

"Yes. Once they've decided there's no hope for the person to return, at church the bishop officially casts the person out to Satan. They're a heathen because they didn't want to live the Amish way." Aaron was still speaking, and even from a distance Isaac could see the pleading in his expression.

"Wow. It sounds so…"

"Cruel?" He tried to ignore the lump in his throat. "They think it's right. Not just my parents—the bishop and the preachers. The whole

community. It's their way. They think it's the best way to show love. Because if you love someone, you want what's best for them, and being Amish is best. The only way." Although he'd been gone for months, it felt strange to talk about it in terms of *them* and *us.* Now Father was saying something, and Isaac wished he could hear.

"They'll still talk to people who are shunned, though? Or is this a special circumstance?" Danielle asked.

"They can still talk, although they usually don't. No one can sell Aaron anything or buy from him, or take something directly from his hand. He'd have to eat at a separate table. He's a total outcast."

Danielle sighed, tucking a dark strand of hair that had escaped from her bun behind her ear. "So what good does all that tough love do?"

Isaac smiled wryly at the English term. "It's supposed to convince the person to return to Amish life, so they can find salvation again. Get to heaven. When Aaron left, I prayed morning and night that he'd come back to us. It killed me to think of him not being in heaven. Everything was so black and white. I guess it still is for our parents."

"How's your friend David? I asked about him, and I got the impression that you guys left town together?"

Isaac's chest tightened as fresh longing for David washed over him, quickly followed by uncertainty and maybe anger. He nodded through the confusion. "We did. He's on his way."

Danielle lowered her voice. "You two are *together* together, yes?"

He nodded jerkily. They still were, weren't they? *We have to be.* "Yes."

"But your families have no idea? Aside from your brother there, I assume."

Isaac nodded again, and his fingers tingled. "They can't find out."

She patted his arm. "Don't worry, hon. They won't find out from me. Would you be excommunicated too?"

Down the hall, Aaron's voice rose, and Isaac itched to go over and find out what they were saying. But he waited and focused on Danielle again. "No. I haven't joined the church, so they couldn't excommunicate me. But I'd be shunned all the same even if it wasn't official." His breath stuttered. Even though he'd left Zebulon and hadn't spoken to anyone there for months, the thought still sent cold terror slipping down his spine. The thought of his family knowing he was gay was even worse. "I think it would hurt them even more than this—than me leaving and being lost to the world. They could never understand my kind of sin."

"I don't think it's a sin, but I understand what you're saying." She smiled sadly.

"Isaac." Father's commanding voice rang out.

Isaac's feet moved obediently before he could even blink. Aaron stood with his arms crossed and jaw tight, and Mother had vanished, presumably back into Nathan's room. *Nathan*. Isaac nodded as he reached the end of the hall. "Father," he croaked.

Father's gaze swept over him coldly from head to toe, and for the first time since he'd tried them on in the store, the English clothes felt unbearably *wrong*. He'd had a quick shower at June's after arriving, and at least there was no gel in his too-short hair. He tugged at the collar of his jacket, almost unzipping it before realizing that using a worldly zipper in front of Father would only make things worse. He craned his neck to see into the room, but could only make out the foot of a bed.

He cleared his throat. "How is he?"

"The Lord might want him in heaven soon," Father answered in German.

Aaron scoffed and muttered something under his breath.

Isaac choked down the bile that threatened. He struggled to find the right words in German. "But if he has a transplant? Will he get better?" He honestly wasn't sure what a bone marrow transplant really was or how it worked. Aaron had tried to explain, but it was so hard to understand.

"If it's God's will," Father answered. He stared at Isaac. "But you've forgotten about God. You've let the world take you." His gaze flicked to Aaron. "Let yourself be led astray."

"No. It isn't Aaron's fault. Father, I know it's hard for you to understand—"

"*Hard*?" Father boomed before he glanced around and straightened his shoulders. He turned on his heel and marched into Nathan's room.

When the door didn't close, Isaac tentatively followed with Aaron behind him. He swallowed the urge to cry out at the sight of Nathan—pale and far too small in the bed, with plastic tubes disappearing into his nose and arm, and his brown hair plastered to his forehead. That their parents had admitted him to the modern hospital meant his prognosis was grim, but seeing him so wispy and weak still stole the breath from Isaac.

The mechanical beeping tapping out the rhythm of Nathan's heart was the only sound in the room. That, and Nathan's soft snores. Guilt and shame flared in Isaac as he remembered all the times he'd complained about Nathan's sudden snoring keeping him awake. The thought that it was a symptom of the cancer ripped into Isaac. *I should have known.*

The rest of them were so silent they might have been holding their breath. Mother stood by the head of Nathan's bed with her hands

clasped and knuckles white. She stared at Nathan, and Isaac willed her to look up. He thought again of the last time they'd been in this hospital after Mrs. Lantz's buggy accident, and the way Mother had held him so tightly. There would be no hugs today.

"Mother, I'm sorry."

Her head shot up. "Are you, Isaac?" She glanced at Aaron behind him, and her eyes glistened. "It's not too late. You can come home."

"Mother…" A little part of him was tempted despite everything. It would be so easy to go back to the way things were, to a time when he knew all the rules. It all seemed so easy compared to now. Of course he knew it could never be simple again, and that it never really was.

Reaching out, she took a step toward him. "Isaac, you can return home and make everything right. This was only a phase. You don't belong in the world. You're not like him."

Aaron's voice was razor thin. "My own mother can't even say my name."

Mother's lips trembled. "You've made it clear that you will not repent your wickedness. You should beg God for redemption. If you showed true humbleness of heart and willingness to atone, you know we would welcome you home. We have prayed for it all these years. But now you're corrupting our Isaac as well."

"He's not! He didn't do anything but help me," Isaac insisted.

"*Help* you?" Mother turned away, and her voice wavered. "You break our hearts."

In the silence that followed, Nathan snorted and shifted on the bed, his lips parted.

"We should go get tested," Aaron said. "That's why we're here. For our brother."

Father regarded Aaron stonily. "We don't want anything from you unless you return to the church and make up for what you've done. Show true remorse."

"You wouldn't even talk on the phone for Nathan's sake." Aaron's eyes flashed. "Your precious rules are more important. I wasn't about to let Isaac come here alone. No way. Do you even care about Nathan? I'm amazed you didn't just concoct some home remedy from the newspaper and try to pray the cancer away. Why is okay to take English medicine with all these machines and electricity now? You're such hypocrites."

Father's voice was barely a whisper. "We want our Nathan to live. Saving him is the most important thing, if God wills it. We've lost two sons already."

Two sons. Isaac ached, and had to look down at his shoes, blinking quickly.

"We'll go talk to the doctor." Aaron spun around and was gone.

Isaac looked between his parents, and at Nathan's pale face. "I'll see you tomorrow. When Nathan's awake." He backed up. "I'm sorry."

"Isaac, my son."

He stopped, his heart pounding. "Yes, Father?"

Father grasped his hand. "It isn't too late for you. Come home. Yield to the Lord and all will be forgiven."

"I…"

"Please, Isaac," Mother whispered. "*Please*."

Father was holding his hand so tightly, and Isaac could barely get the words out. "How are Ephraim and the others? Can I come see them?"

Father glanced to Mother before answering. "We'll pray on it. Everything is already upside down with Nathan here. We don't want to confuse them further."

"Isaac, come on," Aaron called from the corridor.

Gently, Isaac tugged his hand free of his father's, bearing the weight of his parents' disappointment with each step he took away from them.

#

"Still on West Coast time?"

Isaac jumped as June joined him by the fence. He tried to smile. "I suppose so."

"Sorry—didn't mean to startle you. I thought you were fast asleep upstairs."

"I tried, but…" Isaac fiddled with a knot in the old wood.

"I understand." June squeezed his shoulder. "I'm sure you'll be able to speak to Nathan first thing tomorrow."

He nodded, because there was nothing else to say. The ground was mushy, and his sneakers were undoubtedly getting muddy, but he didn't want to go back inside. "How are you? I didn't even ask."

June smiled. "I'm good. Same old, same old. Glad spring's finally coming. I was envious of you boys out in California." She snorted. "My friend Susan is trying to convince me to move down to Florida with her. She's living in a retirement complex. Condos around a big pool, and right near a golf course. She does aquafit every morning and plays bingo or golf in the afternoons. She loves it."

"It sounds…good?" Isaac wasn't sure what kind of game bingo was, but it didn't really matter.

"I'd hate it. All those people around every day?" June shuddered. "No thank you. I'm quite content here in my little corner of the world."

Isaac peered at the stars glittering amid the black shadows of clouds. "It's so quiet. I forgot how much."

“You’re a city boy now, huh?” The breeze lifted June’s tawny hair, and she brushed it from her face.

Was he? “I don’t know. It’s been exciting. I especially like being by the sea.” He loved the salt in the air by the water, but here the country air smelled just as sweet. He’d never really appreciated it before.

“I went to the ocean once. Atlantic City in the summer. There really is nothing quite like it. I can imagine San Francisco is pretty amazing.”

“Yeah.” Isaac smiled as he thought about riding the cable car with David. “I got to do so many new things. I met new people, and they liked me. They didn’t think I was a weirdo. I always dreamed of going to different places, and now I can.”

June smiled. “Sounds fun.”

“Yeah.” Isaac fiddled with a bit of old wire tied to the fence. “Fun. But it’s like…I didn’t realize until I came back here how much of a blur it’s all been. Everything is fast, fast, fast. Away from the city again, I feel like I can breathe deeper, even with everything that’s happening.” He ran a hand through his hair. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sure it does.” She took an exaggerated breath and blew it out with a crooked smile. “There’s nothing like country air and peace and quiet to restore the soul.”

“I wish I could have them both. The city and the country, I mean.”

“Why can’t you? Plenty of people commute into cities, and even a country mouse like me enjoys visiting the big smoke sometimes. It doesn’t have to be one or the other.”

“I guess not. I never really thought about it. I’m not even sure of all the options. The world is so big.”

“No need to choose right now. You’ve got a lot of years of living ahead of you, Isaac.”

He debated whether he should ask or not. “You don’t get lonely out here?”

“Oh, I still have friends in Warren. I miss my husband, of course.” Her gaze grew wistful. “He was a good egg, my Conrad. But I’ll see him again sooner or later. He’s holding a spot for me in heaven.”

Isaac smiled, but then a sinking sensation slithered through him. Would he go to heaven now? It was a question he’d asked himself countless times since leaving Zebulon, and now that he was back he wasn’t any closer to an answer.

“What is it?”

“Just thinking about heaven.” He watched the bare tree limbs sway as another icy puff of wind came from the east. “Everyone in

Zebulon says there's only one way to get there."

"And what do you say, Isaac?"

"I don't know. I…I'm not willing to give up David for it. Or give up who I am. But then I feel guilty, and I worry that it's the wrong choice."

"To thine own self be true. Some old guy said that hundreds of years ago, and I think he was onto something. You're a good person, Isaac. I think God loves you just the way you are. You and David both. Oh, I can't wait to see him again."

Standing by the old paddock fence under the hiding moon, longing filled all the corners in Isaac. He wanted David here with him. He looked to the woods across the field, and was glad it was too dark for June to see the blush that heated his cheeks as he remembered that night when they'd tumbled from David's horse and rutted together for the first time. It had been so glorious and…he thought of the word he'd learned in class. *Liberating.*

"I met your brother Ephraim the other week."

Isaac tore his gaze away from the trees and stared at June, his heart tripping. "You did? Where?"

"Anna brought him over a little while ago. He's quite a ball of energy. I think she has a little crush on him, although I bet she'd deny it fiercely."

"That sounds like Anna. And like Ephraim. I want to go over to the house right now and pound on the door so I can see him and Joseph and Katie. What if my parents don't let me see them?" His smile was gone, and nausea had him swallowing hard. "I need to see them. Did Ephraim mention me? Is he mad that I left without saying goodbye?"

"I think he likely was, but when I spoke to him he only seemed curious. He asked a dozen questions about you and Aaron."

Isaac gripped the fence. "Does he know about me and David? Did Anna tell him? Did you?"

"Of course I didn't." June clasped her hand over one of his on the worn wood. "I don't think Anna has either. It would be best to tell him yourself, and I think you should. For better or worse. But it's your decision. I only want what's best for you. For all of you."

He nodded. "Thank you. For everything." The thought of telling Ephraim was almost as frightening as telling their parents. What if Ephraim was disgusted? What if he turned away?

June was quiet for a few moments. "I like Aaron. David says he's been very good to you both."

Isaac's stomach flip-flopped. Looking out at June's empty fields, he remembered David there with him again, pale in the moonlight, their lips meeting sweetly, and then the heat of their tongues

discovering what a kiss really was. “He has. I don’t know what we would have done without Aaron.”

“This must be very difficult for him to see your parents again after so many years.”

“Yes.” Isaac scraped the word out through his sandpaper throat.

“Difficult for your parents too. And wonderful at the same time. I can’t imagine how much they’ve missed him. It’s not an easy thing to cut off your own child. I’m not saying it’s the right thing either.” She sighed. “The Amish sure don’t make it easy on themselves, do they?”

Isaac half smiled. “Definitely not.”

“It’s great that the oncologist is making visits here instead of having Nathan transfer to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. That would be quite a hardship on your parents. Way too far to go by buggy.”

“Danielle said it’s such an unusual case that he’ll probably get to write some kind of paper on it. Oh, Danielle’s a nurse. She was there after the accident last year.”

“Ah, yes. I remember her. She was very kind.”

A gust of wind sent a shiver through Isaac. Before he could stop himself, he blurted, “I don’t know what to do.” He traced the knot of wood with his finger.

“About what in particular, sweetheart?” June rubbed his back in that easy way English people had of touching.

Isaac wanted to lean into her arms and push away the thoughts jumbling his mind. “I don’t know. Everything. I hate how my parents look at me now. The disappointment. The betrayal. And if they knew that I’m gay on top of it, I just…I can’t imagine how they’d react to that.” He took a deep breath. “And I’m angry with David.”

She didn’t stop rubbing his back. “What happened?”

“It’s…we…” It felt disloyal talking to June about David, especially since she was his friend first. “I should have made him talk to me. I knew something was wrong the last couple of months.”

June sighed. “That boy does tend to bottle up everything inside.”

The memory of David without a shirt and Clark pressed against him flashed in Isaac’s mind. “I want to trust him, but I feel like I don’t even trust myself. Do you know what I mean? I’m angry at him, but I’m angry with me too.”

“Okay. Why’s that?” She gave him a pat before taking her hand away and leaning on the fence. She waited.

Isaac figeted, tapping his fingers on the wood. “Since we got to the city I’ve been able to do everything I wanted for the first time in my life. Aaron and Jen and David were all taking care of me. I could go to school and hang out with my new friends and do cool things and not have to work. I didn’t have to worry about money because I knew Aaron and David would give me whatever I needed.” His cheeks

heated in the cool night. “I let them spoil me. I didn’t help David with work as much as I should have. He kept saying it was okay. I wish he hadn’t. I don’t know why he did.”

“Well, he loves you. He wants the best for you.”

“Of course. I know. But what about him? If he was having such a hard time, why didn’t he tell me?”

She sighed. “Some people have a very hard time talking about their feelings. After his mother’s accident, he wouldn’t talk to you or me. Just kept it all inside.”

Isaac nodded. “But wouldn’t he know that I’d want to listen?”

“The way I see it, Joshua’s death left a deeper mark on David than even he realized. I know I’m being an armchair psychologist, but as the only son left, he felt a great deal of pressure to live up to expectations. Then his father died, and he was responsible for his whole family. On top of all that, he was secretly gay in a society that absolutely forbids it. He must have internalized his fear and loneliness. I think he’s been like an iceberg. Some of it shows, but there’s a lot more going on below the surface.”

“An iceberg,” Isaac repeated. He thought of the movie they’d watched about the ship that hit one.

“I don’t know exactly what was happening with David in San Francisco, but I do know he would hate to disappoint you. I can easily imagine him biting his tongue rather than risk upsetting you or failing you in some way.”

The thought made Isaac want to cry. “But I love him. We’d work through it. I don’t want to be coddled like some little kid.”

“I don’t blame you. But I imagine he also felt awfully vulnerable.”

Isaac frowned. “Why? I was with him. I would never let anything bad happen.”

“Yes, but there he was living with you and your brother. Even though he was working, he was quite dependent on Aaron and Jen. He’s been the one others have relied on since his father died. But in San Francisco he lives under your brother’s roof, and everyone he knows is connected to Aaron or Jen. I know he was stressed about the money they’d spent on him.”

“But they don’t mind.”

“I’m sure they don’t, but you can imagine how…exposed he must have felt. If you and he broke up, where would that leave him?”

Isaac’s voice rose sharply. “But we won’t! Just because I’m mad and, and *hurt* doesn’t mean we’re going to break up.”

“I know, sweetheart. I’m not saying you’re going to.”

“And just because we’re young doesn’t mean it’s not real.” His stomach churned at the thought of life without David. “I want to do new things, but I want to do them with him.” Isaac shook his head.

“I’m sorry I’m yelling at you.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad it riles you up. Fight for what you want. Fight for him. Fight *with* him if that’s what it takes. Don’t let him bottle it up and tell you everything’s fine. Call him on it.” She raised her eyebrows. “And you don’t stick your head in the sand.”

Isaac nodded. “I let him tell me he was fine. And there was stuff that bugged me, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to think about it. There were so many other things going on that I told myself it would all work itself out.” He sighed. “Dumb, I know.”

“Human is more like it. Relationships aren’t easy. You have to work at it.”

Isaac stuck the rubber toe of his sneaker into the mud. “I always thought once you loved someone, the rest just fell into place.”

June’s laughter echoed across the field. “Wouldn’t that be nice? Love counts for a lot, but you need a heck of a lot of patience and grit too. Sometimes Conrad would frustrate me to no end. I did the same to him. But we’d talk it through. Compromise. But you and David can’t do that if you’re not being honest with each other.”

Isaac thought of Clark and what he’d overheard that first night at the bar. Why hadn’t he told David? Maybe David wasn’t the only one who bottled things up sometimes. “You’re right.” He nodded, his mind whirling with all the things he and David needed to discuss. “You’re right,” he repeated.

“Of course I am. I’m a wise old woman, Isaac.”

“You’re not old. You seem way younger than my mother.”

“Well, I haven’t popped out what is it, eight kids? Plus I have electricity. How does she manage all that laundry?”

Isaac realized he’d never thought about it. “She just does.”

“That’s what moms do. Now what I can do is make a mean cup of cocoa, as you know.”

Smiling softly, Isaac remembered sitting in June’s cozy kitchen after speaking to Aaron on the phone, a sweetly steaming mug warm between his palms. “I do know that. Thank you. Not just for that.” He swallowed thickly.

“I know. How about we head in and I’ll whip some up? You’ll be sleeping in no time. You need to get some rest. I don’t imagine you slept much on the plane.”

Isaac chuckled ruefully. “No. Aaron did, but I kept worrying the plane would fall out of the sky.”

“I hear you.” She linked her arm with his, and they made their way back to the two-story farmhouse. “Conrad would be out like a light as soon as we got into the sky, but not me. No, sir.”

A little while later, Isaac curled under a thick Amish quilt in the room June had given him with the taste of chocolate lingering on his

tongue. The bed was unbearably empty, and he realized it was the first night he'd slept alone since he and David had left Zebulon. The first time he'd slept alone since he could even remember. Closing his eyes, he said a prayer that it would be the last.

Chapter Two

"Please ensure your tray table and seat back are in the upright and locked positions, and that all cabin baggage is safely stowed in the overhead bins or under the seat in front of you."

David's pulse thrummed as the jet's engines roared to life. He was close to the front of the plane, and when he looked back through his window, he could just make out the blur of the propeller's blades in the dawn. Swallowing hard, he turned back around. One of the uniformed women stood in the aisle a few feet away.

"Please turn your attention to the nearest flight attendant as we outline the safety features of this aircraft."

He watched as the woman pointed to the exits and held up a seatbelt while the voice came over the speakers. A man of about fifty sat next to him by the aisle. The man hadn't even glanced at the flight attendant, and tapped his tablet obliviously. David had half a mind to tell him to pay attention, but when he looked around he saw that no one seemed to be watching the demonstration. He focused on the attendant, taking note of the nearest exit and making sure his seatbelt was securely fastened. When the presentation was over, he pulled out the safety card from the pocket in front of him and examined it closely.

They were moving now, slowly heading toward their runway. David shivered as he studied the images on the card. He hoped they wouldn't have to make an emergency landing over water.

"Sir, please turn off all electronic devices until we're in the air and the captain has turned off the fasten-seatbelt sign."

The man beside David grumbled under his breath, but did as he was told. The flight attendant, a middle-aged woman, flashed David a smile. "Glad to see you're prepared for an emergency."

He tried to smile back, but had a feeling it was more of a grimace.

She smiled again. "Nervous?"

"Uh-huh." After a moment he blurted, "I've never flown before."

The man stared. "*Never*?"

David flushed and shook his head.

"There's a first time for everyone," the flight attendant said kindly. "Don't worry. I know the idea might seem scary, but it'll be smooth sailing, okay?"

As the woman hurried down the aisle, David tucked the safety card back in its spot. Carefully, he pulled the folded piece of paper from his flannel shirt pocket and smoothed it out.

David, you're not answering when I call. I wish you were here!

Nathan is sick. I don't really understand it, but it sounds very bad, and I'm afraid that if I don't go right now he'll die before I see him again. They won't let him talk to me on the phone. I don't know what else to do.

Aaron's coming with me. I know I said a lot of things, and that we still need to talk. I love you. I hope you know that.

He'd memorized the note by now, but David read the last two lines over and over. Isaac still loved him. It helped calm the churning in his gut, and ease the panic that threatened him when he thought of their argument in the kitchen, and what Isaac had seen at the nightclub.

Why did I even go to that stupid place?

If he hadn't gone, Clark would never have kissed him, and Isaac wouldn't have seen them together, and David would already be in Minnesota with him. He cringed as he remembered waking in his workshop after drinking a whole bottle of alcohol. His palms still hurt where he'd cut himself on broken glass, and the little sticky bandages Jen had applied were starting to peel. He'd been a mess.

He'd stubbornly wanted to handle everything himself, but after he'd told Jen the truth, he'd felt better, not worse. She hadn't told him he was stupid or a failure, or laughed at him. She'd been kind. After he'd said the words out loud, he wished he could make the clock go back so he could tell Isaac too. But he'd tell him now, as soon as he had the chance.

David rubbed his eyes and stretched his neck. Once Jen had realized he wouldn't be able to get a flight until morning, she'd taken him to the hospital and hooked him up to machines for tests. Everything had been fine—he wasn't dying after all. He tried to remember the word Jen had used for what he felt. Ah, yes. *Anxiety*. She said it could be a disorder sometimes.

"Flight attendants, please be seated for takeoff."

His breath caught. Jen had said he was having panic attacks, and he couldn't afford to have one now. He concentrated on inhaling and exhaling deeply and evenly the way she'd showed him.

"Don't worry." The man glanced up from his paperback. "This is the safest way to travel."

David jerked out a nod as the plane turned and briefly came to a stop. He held his breath. Was something wrong? Why were they—

With more force than David could have imagined, the plane accelerated down the runway. It seemed impossible that they could go that fast, and a thrill zipped through him. English technology was so incredible and terrifying at the same time. Transfixed, David stared out the window, the lights of the runway whipping by as the engines flexed their muscles. Then, with a *thunk*, the whole plane lurched into the air. The airport was fading away, and he could see the ocean. He

laughed out loud.

"See? It's easy." The man smiled not unkindly.

The plane shuddered with a sudden dip, and David bit back a yelp.

"It's normal. Don't worry." The man chuckled. "Kid, if you're gonna white-knuckle it all the way, I think you could use a drink."

David realized he was gripping the arm rests, and a little part of him leapt up at the thought of a drink. *Just one to smooth out the bumps.* But he shook his head to himself. No drinks. He could do this on his own. Closing his eyes, he breathed in for five whole seconds, and then held it the same amount of time before exhaling slowly.

With a *ding*, the light with a little picture of a seatbelt above him went out. Someone got up and went to the bathroom, and the attendants bustled about. David stayed put with his seatbelt digging into his hips. But he smiled again as he peered out, marveling. A fluffy white carpet stretched out as far as he could see, the sun beaming. He couldn't believe he was actually seeing the world from above the clouds. It looked so pure and fresh, like anything was possible.

"Can I get you a beverage?"

David turned to find the attendant in the aisle. She passed him a bag of pretzels.

"I think he could use a scotch," the man beside David said with a smirk.

"Well, you are in the Executive Club section." Her teeth gleamed. "Is that what you'd like?"

"No!" David realized he'd spoken too loudly, and cleared his throat. "Do you have Coke?"

Her smile didn't waver. "Sure thing. Just twist that plastic knob there and put down your tray."

He wasn't hungry, but David forced himself to eat the salty snack. There was a TV in the seat in front of him, but he watched the clouds instead. He should try to sleep, but he felt like electricity was humming in him.

He wondered how Nathan was doing. Aaron had texted Jen that Nathan was "hanging in there," which didn't sound particularly good to David. It was hard to believe Isaac's little brother had cancer. *Why would God let that happen?* It was a blasphemous thought, but he couldn't help it.

David turned on his phone and scrolled through the few pictures he had. Most Isaac had texted him, and David went back to the very first one from the pier in San Francisco the day they'd rode the cable car and seen the sea lions. The bay was behind them, and they laughed in their new raincoats and haircuts, their shoulders pressed together.

Swallowing thickly, David stared at the image. Somehow he'd let things get messed up. He'd let himself get so lost. But he'd fix it. Even if it took a year for Isaac to forgive him, he wouldn't give up. Not when they'd already sacrificed so much. At the thought of Mother and his sisters, David's mouth went dry. He rested his phone on the tray table and gulped his Coke.

What would Mother say when he saw her? Would she even say a word? She'd lost one son to drugs and running wild, and he wasn't sure she could ever forgive him for going into the world. Never mind if she found out he was gay. And Mary… He pressed his lips together. How it would break Mary's heart to ever know that David and Isaac were together. She'd loved Isaac for so long.

A little voice reminded him that Isaac was gay, and that even if he'd never met David, he wouldn't have loved Mary back. *But if he hadn't met me, he might have married her all the same. He might never have left.* The thought sent icy dread washing over him. For either he or Isaac to have stayed and marry a woman would have made for a life of hollow misery.

At least Anna knew and didn't condemn him. She would be his ally in Zebulon, of that he was confident. Anna wasn't made for the Amish life. It would never fit her properly, or more accurately, she would never fit it. Of course Mother and Bishop Yoder would disagree strongly. He could just imagine Deacon Stoltzfus's glower.

With a violent shudder, the plane dipped as if it was a buggy bumping over a pothole. David tensed, his eyes darting left and right. His seatmate didn't seem the slightest bit concerned, and was watching a movie on his tablet with headphones in his ears.

"Just a bit of turbulence," the attendant said, appearing in the aisle. She held out a small package of cookies and winked. "Here. Have a little treat. You'll feel better."

Normally he just nodded and smiled when he didn't understand. But this time he asked, "What does that mean?"

"Turbulence? It's to do with the air streams outside. Every so often we'll rattle around a bit, but it's nothing to worry about. Happens on just about every flight. We'll be fine."

As the plane flew on, jolting every so often, David rolled the new word around in his mind. *Turbulence*. He still tensed every time the plane shook, but after a while he was able to eat the cookies, savoring the chocolate chips. He stared at the laughing picture from the pier, wishing he could press a button like on a remote control so everything went fast until he was back with Isaac again and they were laughing once more.

#

Towing June's little purple suitcase, David scanned the crowd. His

fellow passengers surged through the glass doors, and he kept walking as he searched the hundreds of people waiting. He heart swelled as he spotted June's familiar smile, her arm raised in a beckoning wave.

The lines around her eyes crinkled as they met in the crowd. "Hey, stranger." She wrapped her arms around him, and David breathed in oranges. She leaned back. "Come on, let's get out of here."

They wove their way through the endless people and rolling carts of baggage, finally escaping to a concrete parking garage with many levels. June muttered, "D-twelve" to herself, and led the way to the truck. It felt somehow like an old friend, and David was happy to climb in.

"Are you hungry? I hear they don't really feed you on planes these days. We can stop at a roadside place once we get away from the city."

"I don't know if I can eat. I need to get to Isaac. Have you heard anything about Nathan?"

June reversed out of the parking spot. "I'll tell you everything I know on the way. And you're eating. Knowing you I bet you didn't sleep a wink, so you're getting a good lunch."

David had to smile. "Yes, ma'am."

As they exited onto the highway going north, June filled him in. David went cold all over at the news of Nathan's chances if neither Isaac or Aaron were a match. "How are Isaac and Aaron?"

"They're hanging in there."

Hanging in there. It was apparently the English term for when things were terrible and there was nothing else to do but keep going and hope it got better.

June pulled into the right lane. "There's a place up here with all-day breakfast. Sound good? Sometimes breakfast is just what you need for lunch."

Before long they were settled in a booth by the window facing the parking lot. Cars zipped by on the highway in the distance. Even though he hadn't thought he could eat, David's stomach growled at the smell of grease and toast. He had a coffee, and inhaled the bitter scent.

After they ordered, June went to the bathroom, and David listened to the chatter and *clinks* of the restaurant, the music echoing from above and the indistinct hum of conversation buzzing all around as waitresses strode down the aisles carrying large plates. Aside from visiting Gary, David hadn't been to many restaurants. Jen and Aaron had taken them to a Japanese place that had rolls of sushi and other strange, fishy dishes that came by in little boats. It had practically been like having dinner on another planet. He'd liked the salty soy sauce, but the other flavors had been confusing.

Of course he'd never tried sushi again after that one time. David made a deal with himself that instead of his usual peanut butter sandwich, he'd get Japanese food for lunch one day when they got back to San Francisco. His stomach soured as he wondered when that would be. He hadn't imagined coming back to Minnesota so soon.

One of the waitresses going by had bottles of beer on her tray, and David felt a pang for the comforting numbness alcohol had brought. He shook his head.

"No what?" June slid back into the booth and peeled the lid off a little plastic container of cream.

A lie sprang to his lips, but David didn't speak it. Instead he swallowed it down and drew out the truth instead. "I was just thinking that I don't need to have a drink to feel better."

June looked up sharply from where she stirred a packet of sugar into her coffee. "I've never known you to be a drinker."

"I wasn't. I'm not. Not really. It's…" He took a sip of coffee, steadying himself. "It's hard to talk about this. I know that's stupid."

"It's not stupid. Talking about the tough stuff is something plenty people have trouble with. But you know you can tell me anything, hon."

He nodded. *She won't hate me.* "I've been having panic attacks. And I'd drink to feel better, or to try and stop them. Basically so I wouldn't really feel anything." The words hung between them, and David's heart thumped.

June put her spoon on the side of her saucer. "Okay. Have you seen a doctor?"

David told her about Jen and the tests at the hospital. "I'm fine. I just need to…do this. Talk. To you. To Isaac. To everyone."

She nodded. "How did you hurt your hands? Did you cut yourself?"

"I broke a bottle." He fiddled with the little bandages. "It was an accident, I swear."

"I believe you."

"Thank you," he whispered. He gulped his coffee. June seemed to be waiting for him to say more. "After we left, it wasn't like I thought it would be. There were some things that were wonderful. But it was hard. Confusing. I wanted to protect Isaac the way I couldn't with my mother and sisters. So I didn't tell him how I was feeling."

"Hmm. He said you and Aaron spoiled him."

David's heart stuttered. "He did? What else did he say?" *Did I spoil him? I only wanted him to be happy.*

"We talked for a little while. It sounds like you both made mistakes, but you can get past this."

"Isaac didn't do anything wrong. It was all me."

She shook her head. “Neither of you is perfect, David. Communication is a two-way street. Blaming yourself for everything that’s gone wrong isn’t the solution. And I’m not saying to blame him either. It’s not about blame. It’s about loving each other.”

The waitress appeared with plates of eggs, bacon, sausage, and waffles. David poked at his scrambled eggs. “I do love him. More than anything.”

“Of course you do.” June nodded at his plate. “Now eat something.”

David did as he was told. The salty meat was surprisingly good, and he realized how hungry he was. They didn’t speak for a few minutes as they ate. Memories flickered in his mind—working side by side with Isaac in the barn, wanting him so much it *hurt*. Taking him to the drive-in and finally kissing him, and how powerful it had felt coming with him for the first time—actually sharing in his wrong desires with someone else. Someone he loved and trusted.

Resolutely, David asked the question that churned his stomach alarmingly. “Did he tell you about Clark?”

June wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Who’s Clark?”

The restaurant was noisy, and David wished the jangle of too-loud music and murmur of conversations would stop. It was hard to think. “He’s Jen’s best friend. He was our friend too, or at least I thought so. I guess he’d…liked me for a while, but I didn’t realize. We went to one of those dance club places, and he kissed me. Isaac was going to surprise me. He saw us.”

June winced. “Did you kiss this Clark person back?”

The thought of Clark’s sweaty skin and his wet lips mashed against his own made David nauseous now. But he couldn’t deny that for a couple of heartbeats, he hadn’t pushed Clark away. “For a second. I was so shocked, and I’d been drinking, and…it felt good. Then I realized what was happening and I tried to leave, but he was hanging onto me, and he followed me into the bathroom.”

June sighed. “And one thing led to another?”

“What? No.” David sat up straighter. “No. I told him to stop. I told him I didn’t want that. And I didn’t. I don’t.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” She sat back. “You had me worried there for a moment.”

“But I let Clark kiss me.”

“He kissed you without your permission, and you stopped it. You didn’t do anything wrong. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“But…” David shuddered at the nausea that waved through him. “I don’t know if Isaac believes me. He saw us going into the bathroom, and he thinks I was taking Clark there. To do things.”

June’s brows drew together. “He thinks you cheated on him, even

though you told him you didn't?"

David shoved his straw between the ice cubes melting in his water glass. He nodded.

"Well, that must hurt something awful."

The tightness in David's chest increased. "It really does," he whispered. "That he'd think I could do that. I would never. He's the only one I want. People say we're young, and we've never been with anyone else, and we don't know any better yet. But I don't care how many other men are out there. I want to be with him. Being in the world didn't change that. Not for me. But he's going to school now, and he's got these new friends. He doesn't know if he still wants to be a carpenter. What if—"

After a few moments, June prompted him quietly. "What?"

His heart was in his throat just saying the words. "What if he decides he doesn't want me anymore?"

Her face creased, and she reached out and squeezed his hand. "He wants you, David."

"You think so?" He knew in the end it only mattered what Isaac thought, but it helped to hear it.

"You're damn right I do. Any relationship worth having is going to take some work. Hard work. But if anyone's up for hard work, it's you and Isaac. You hear me? No giving up."

He clutched her hand. "I won't. Sometimes I think…" He tried to find the right words. "It's like I hear voices in my head." At her widening eyes, he quickly added, "Not really. Not the way people who are sick do. Just…" He exhaled sharply.

"It's okay. Take your time." She squeezed his fingers.

"There are all these things in my head, but it's hard to say them."

"Emotional constipation."

Despite himself, David laughed. Then June laughed too, and she patted his hand before letting go and waving at his plate. "Eat a bit more while you think about it. You know, we all make mistakes sometimes. Even me, if you can believe it."

He smiled softly. "Impossible."

"If Conrad were still here, he could tell you about a ton of mistakes. He wouldn't, though." She chuckled fondly. "He'd have told you I was an angel."

"I can believe it."

"Oh, go on now."

He ate another piece of bacon, the words swirling around his mind as he tried to organize them. Finally he said, "I hear voices telling me I'm a sinner. That I'm not good enough. That I'm like my brother. Selfish and bad. It's like I can hear the preachers saying it. And I try to be better. I really do."

“Oh, David. You’re one of the best people I’ve ever known.” Her eyes glistened. “It breaks my heart to hear you say those things. That you would ever think those things about yourself. I don’t care what Bishop Yoder or the preachers say, or what the Ordnung says, or what the Bible says. I’m a Christian woman, but being gay is not an abomination.” She slammed her fist on the table dully. “It isn’t. My God loves everyone just the way He made them.”

“I want to believe that.” The little seed of hope that had been buried in the darkness since his mother’s accident bloomed to life. “Even after we left that day and went to San Francisco, I…I still felt like they were right. But…”

“What, sweetheart?”

“I don’t want to feel that way anymore.” David’s throat was tight. “I don’t want to be afraid.” He whispered, “I don’t want to hate myself.”

She reached for his hand again. “That’s the first step, David. I’m proud of you.”

“But—”

“*I’m proud of you*. Don’t argue with me, young man. You should be proud of yourself too.”

He smiled, a surge of love for June warming him through and through. “Yes, ma’am.” Maybe he should be proud of himself. It felt good.

“Excellent. You’re learning.” She winked at him before waving to the waitress. “Now let’s see what they have for dessert. We need some pie before we get back on the road.”

Happiness at seeing Isaac again warred with the tension that crept back in at the thought of returning to Zebulon. *One step at a time. Breathe.* He nodded. “Pie sounds perfect.”

Chapter Three

"Isaac?"

Tentatively, Isaac neared the foot of the bed. Mother and Father stood on either side of it. He smiled. "Hi, Nathan."

Nathan smiled weakly. "I'm so glad to see you." He reached out a hand.

Isaac's heart thumped as he went to the side of the bed, Mother moving just enough so he could take his brother's clammy palm. He squeezed it and tried to smile brightly. "I'm so glad to see you too. How are you feeling?"

It was a stupid question, and he regretted the words instantly. He could see for himself that Nathan was feeling terribly. He was tired and sickly, and nothing at all like the gangly thirteen-year-old Isaac remembered, whose biggest worry had been his new pimples. The marks were still there, angry and red splotches against his pale cheeks. His hair was thin, and there were bare patches. Isaac tried not to stare.

But Nathan didn't seem to mind the question. "Better now that you're here. I've missed you so much. We all have."

"I've missed you too." Isaac squeezed Nathan's palm, not wanting to let go.

Nathan's gaze flickered to the doorway, and he frowned. "Hello."

Frozen in the entrance, Aaron smiled tightly. "Hi, Nathan. You probably don't remember me. You were too young."

As his eyes widened, Nathan glanced at their parents and then back to Aaron. "Are you…him?"

The air seemed so thick it might have been fog. Mother and Father were rigid and unmoving, as was Aaron. Isaac let go of Nathan's hand so he could cross to the door. He touched Aaron's arm and urged him inside. "Yes. Nathan, this is our brother. Aaron."

Gazing at their parents with uncertainty slashed across his face, Nathan stammered. "Uh…oh. I—I…hi." He inhaled deeply and fiddled with the plastic tubes disappearing into his nose. When he spoke again, a new determination strengthened his voice. "It's good to meet you. Thank you for coming."

"It's good to meet you too." Aaron smiled softly. "I remember you as a little kid. I'm sorry it has to be under these circumstances that I see you again."

"Me too." Nathan glanced at the beeping and whirring machines. "I was sick of going to school, but it doesn't seem so bad at all now."

Another silence settled over the room. Their parents pointedly

didn't look at Aaron. Isaac cleared his throat. "Aaron and I are getting tested. They took our blood and sent it off."

"Sorry you had to get a needle." Nathan grimaced and raised his left arm, which had a needle stuck into it, attached to a plastic tube leading to a bag of fluid that hung on one of the metal racks with wheels. "I hate them. I guess I should get used to it, though."

"It's okay. We didn't mind." Actually Isaac hadn't liked the needle at all, but Aaron had held his other hand and told him a silly story. Isaac tried to think of something else to say. Aaron and their parents were still as statues, looking anywhere but at each other. "Are they testing Abigail and Hannah in Red Hills?" Their older sisters had stayed with their husbands in Ohio when they'd moved to Zebulon.

Nathan looked to their parents. "I'm not sure. I guess so?"

Father answered gruffly, "Yes."

"How's David Lantz?" Nathan asked. "Do you see each other much?"

Isaac concentrated on keeping his tone neutral. "Uh-huh. He lives with us. Aaron and his wife let us both stay with them."

"Oh. That's nice of you," Nathan said to Aaron.

"David lives with you?" Mother asked, clearly taken aback. "Is that why he convinced you to leave? So he'd have a place to stay?"

"*No*." Isaac could sense Aaron bristling beside him as well, and he bit back the flash of anger. "And he didn't convince me to leave. It was my choice. He was going to join the church, remember?"

"How could we forget?" Father asked quietly.

"That was the most exciting church day ever!" Nathan blurted. He flushed cherry red. "Sorry. I didn't mean…never mind."

Isaac shot him a little smile before making his expression blank again. He thought of that day, and how it had felt sitting there on a hard wooden bleacher watching his David take the vows. Even though David hadn't gone through with it and they'd run away together, those terrible minutes before David said *no* would never leave Isaac.

A swell of affection filled him, and he wondered if David's plane had landed yet in Minneapolis. He needed to see him again, and soon. "He's on his way, and I know he'll want to come and say hello."

Father's sharp gaze narrowed. "David Lantz is coming here?" At Isaac's nod he asked, "Why?"

"I…because he's my friend. He wants to help, and see his family."

"Help?" Mother's nostrils flared. "He can help by staying away from you. Not filling your head with worldly nonsense."

"He didn't," Isaac insisted.

Aaron piped up. "Isaac's not a child. He's a man who made his own decisions."

Father clasped his hands tightly in front of him. He ignored Aaron

completely and addressed Isaac. “What of David Lantz’s partnership with that English woman? Lying to his mother for so long and breaking the Ordnung. Sinning and bringing shame to his family.”

“We heard all about his secret workshop on that woman’s farm. Did you ever go there?” Mother asked.

Isaac wanted so badly to lie, but what good would it really do? “Yes. A few times.”

“You’re staying there now, I assume?” Mother’s bonnet strings were tied so tightly under her chin, and her face was red.

“Yes,” Aaron answered. “June’s been very kind to us. She’s picking up David in Minneapolis this morning.”

“How is Mrs. Lantz?” Isaac asked. “Has she recovered well?”

Mother nodded. “No thanks to her son. Eli Helmuth has been such a blessing to Miriam and her girls. They’re all living on his farm now. Miriam is walking again. Though her heart is still broken, of course. A disobedient child is a heavy burden to bear. And that Anna is turning out wild, I just know it.”

Aaron opened his mouth, but snapped it shut again. Isaac’s voice wavered. “David loves his mother and sisters very much. But…”

In the silence, Nathan started coughing, and the beeping on one of the machines sped up. There was a jug of water and a cup on a tray table at the foot of the bed, and Aaron splashed some water into the cup before bringing it to Nathan, who reached for it.

“No!” Mother and Father shouted in unison.

Aaron jerked, still holding the cup. Nathan coughed again, his lungs rattling. Mother and Father were rooted to their spots, and Isaac realized none of them could take anything from Aaron’s hand. He grabbed the cup and passed it to Nathan, helping him hold it as he gulped and sputtered. No one said a thing, and after a minute Nathan’s head flopped back to the pillows.

“Thanks,” he murmured, breathing hard.

Isaac patted his arm, unsure of what else to do. A faint buzzing reached his ears, and Aaron pulled his phone from his pocket. Despite the electric machines hooked up to Nathan, their parents gazed at the phone as though it was the devil’s very own. Aaron stalked into the hallway to answer the call.

“How are things on the farm?” Isaac asked to fill the silence.

“Ephraim is working to the bone while I am here,” Father answered. “But the Lord will see us through.”

“I want to visit. I need to see him and Katie and Joseph. Please? And I can help Ephraim with everything. Please let me help.” He could imagine how much there was to do with all the hours their parents were spending at the hospital, and poor Katie was surely doing the lion’s share of the women’s work.

Mother and Father exchanged a long look. Father stroked his beard, and the habit was so reassuring and familiar that Isaac had to swallow thickly. He waited for Father to speak.

"We have discussed it. Of course you may see your brothers and sisters."

Isaac exhaled in a rush, relief flowing through him. "Thank you."

"But you must come home."

"I…" His heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean?"

"While you are here, you will stay under our roof," Father answered. "If you remain with the English woman, you are not welcome at our home."

Pulse and mind racing, Isaac tried to think of a response. *No! I can never go back! I'll never be able to live that way again. Can't you understand?* But of course they couldn't. Leaving the plain life was the greatest sin there was or ever could be. They would never accept his choice. They thought he could be convinced to come home for good. "But…"

"We must be firm with you Isaac, or we fear we will lose you to the world forever. We have discussed it with Bishop Yoder, and he agrees it is the right thing."

Isaac's mind whirled. He knew he could never be Amish again, as much as he ached to see his whole family again. They didn't know the truth about why he'd left. He looked to Nathan, who watched him with undeniably hopeful eyes.

"We all miss you so much, Isaac. I know the others want to see you again really badly."

He'd abandoned his siblings once, and he couldn't do it again. The thought of being so close to Ephraim, Katie, and Joseph and not being able to see them was unthinkable. Mouth dry, he nodded. "Okay. I'll come home. It doesn't mean I'm staying, though."

Mother smiled, a true smile for the first time since he'd been back. "Oh Isaac, the Lord will be pleased. This is a good thing. We're going home soon, since there is much work to do today."

It would take at least an hour to get from the hospital to the farm. Isaac could hear the murmur of Aaron's voice from the hall, and he swallowed hard. "I'll be back in a minute, and then we can leave." He squeezed Nathan's hand. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

Nathan nodded. "They're going to be so glad to see you." His eyes were growing heavy, and he smiled softly.

In the hall, Isaac took a few deep breaths. *I'm going back. It'll be fine. It's only for now. I'm not staying.*

Aaron glanced over, still on the phone. "Yeah. He's doing okay. Uh-huh. I'll tell him. Love you too, babe." Aaron tapped the phone and put it back in his pocket. "Jen says hi, and that she misses you."

"I miss her too. Is she coming soon?"

"In a few days. She had to shuffle her schedule around." Aaron frowned. "What? What did they say? You look upset."

"I'm fine." It was a lie, of course. He walked a bit further up the hall, tugging Aaron along. "I'm going back with them."

"Okay," Aaron said, leery. "To the farm? They're letting you see the kids?"

"Yes. But I'm going to stay there."

"What does that mean?" His voice rose.

Isaac raised a hand. "It's just while we're here. I have to help. You can imagine how much work there is with Mother and Father here at the hospital every day. I can help Ephraim with the milking and the chores. They need me. The neighbors are helping, but I should be there."

"Isaac, you don't have to sleep there to help with the chores. I can take you over and pick you up." His jaw set, and he looked so much like their mother in that moment. "Don't let them bully you into going back. Don't let them manipulate you. You know they're going to try to talk you into staying for good."

"I know. But it's the only way they'll let me see Ephraim and Katie and Joseph."

Aaron laughed bitterly. "Blackmail—how very Christian of them."

"It's not. I *want* to help them. This is the only way they'll let me. What else can I do?" His stomach roiled. He didn't want Aaron to be angry with him, but he didn't want his parents to be either.

With his hands on his hips, Aaron gritted out, "It's all such bullshit, Isaac. I don't want them to make you doubt yourself."

"They won't. I can handle it. They think it's the right thing. You know they think we're going to hell if we're not Amish."

"There's no hell," Aaron scoffed. "Just the one we make for ourselves. For each other." He rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm sorry. I know you believe in it. I just don't want them to mess with your head. Isaac, you'll never be the good little Amish boy they want you to be."

"I know. But…I love them." He blinked rapidly. "I love them, Aaron. They're doing what they think is right, and I need to go home and see my brothers and sister. I'm sorry."

Aaron sighed. "Don't be sorry. *I'm* sorry. I'm being an asshole."

"You're not." Isaac smiled tentatively. "Well, maybe a little."

Aaron's lips quirked up. "Who can you rely on to tell you the truth if not your brother?"

"I know it's hard." Isaac's smile faded. "But they want what's best for me—just like you do."

"I wish I could agree with them on what that is." Aaron looked at

his shoes, and when he raised his head tears shone in his eyes. He whispered, “I love them too. If I didn’t, it wouldn’t hurt so much.”

“Aaron…” Isaac reached for him, but Aaron stepped away, shaking his head.

“I need to get my shit together. I’m supposed to be taking care of you.”

Wordlessly, Isaac resolutely wrapped his arms around his brother, and they held each other tightly. After a few moments, he whispered, “We’re supposed to take care of each other.”

“Thank you. Oh, Isaac. I know it’s your choice,” Aaron said quietly. “I just worry. You’ve come so far the last few months, and I don’t want going home to mess with your head. I want you to be happy.”

“I want you to be happy too. I’ll be okay.” Stepping back, Isaac swiped his wet eyes. He pulled out his phone and hit the button to call David. It clicked over immediately to voice mail. Isaac’s heart ached as he listened to David’s too-formal message.

“Hello. This is David Lantz. I cannot answer the phone right now. Please leave me a message after the beep and I will call you back as soon as I can. Thank you, and have a very good day.”

“It’s me. You’re probably still on the plane. Nathan’s doing as well as possible, I guess. I need to see the others, so I’m going home with Mother and Father. I need to help around the farm too. I can’t bring my phone, but I’ll see you soon. I…I miss you. I’m so glad you’re coming.” He finished the call and held out the phone to Aaron.

“What? No—take it with you.”

“It wouldn’t be right. Not in their house.”

Aaron shook his head. “Just hide it. They don’t have to know.”

“But I’d know.”

Sighing, Aaron took the phone. “I’ll see you back here tomorrow, okay? Make sure you come with them or I’ll worry. I mean, I know they’re not going to lock you in the ice house until you agree to be baptized, but…I’ll worry anyway.”

“Okay.” He looked beyond Aaron to where Mother and Father now waited, wearing their black coats and watching with matching stoic expression. They turned and walked away, and with a wave to Aaron, Isaac took a deep breath and followed.

#

It was stranger than he would have imagined riding in the back of the family buggy again. Mother and Father perched up front on the bench, and Isaac sat behind. Usually he’d been crammed in with his siblings, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d rode in the back of the covered buggy alone. Wearing his English jeans and other clothes, he felt embarrassed and wrong.

The *clip-clop* of Roy's hooves was soothing, although he winced when the buggy shook as cars sped around them. He'd noticed that they still weren't using lights or the orange safety triangles, even after Mrs. Lantz and Mary had almost died. Maybe they were right that it was all God's will, but he still liked the feel of a seatbelt around him. Besides, if it was God's will, why was English medicine okay when they needed it, but not an orange reflector to try and prevent accidents? If he asked, Isaac knew the response would only be that it was their way.

As they turned up the drive to the farm, his stomach somersaulted. Would Ephraim be mad at him? Perhaps Katie and Joseph would too, and how could he blame them after how he'd left without saying goodbye? He'd written letters, but didn't think their parents had passed them on.

The buggy creaked to a stop, Roy nickering. His heart in his throat, Isaac clambered down. Katie normally would have been at school, but she was coming from the wash house, wiping her hands on her apron. She was almost eleven now, and she seemed at least two inches taller than when he'd seen her last.

Katie gasped. "Isaac!" She bolted toward him across the muddy yard and barreled into his arms.

He squeezed her. "Hi, Katie. I missed you so much."

"Oh, Isaac. Where have you been?" She gripped him, and then, with a glance at their parents, stepped back and straightened her black cap over her light hair. She took in his English clothes with wide eyes. "Are you coming home now?"

Joseph skidded to a stop. He'd run from the barn, and Isaac could see Ephraim in the doorway, his expression hidden by his dark hat and too far away to see anyway. Joseph eyed their parents and then extended his hand.

"Hello, Isaac."

Isaac took his little hand and shook it. "Hello, Joseph. I'm so glad to see you."

"We all are," Father said. "It is a great joy to have Isaac back at home. Where he belongs."

Isaac pulled Joseph into a hug, ruffling his brown hair. He realized he hadn't answered Katie's question. "I'm coming back for a little while to help while Nathan's sick."

Katie's shoulders slumped. "Not to stay?"

Before he could answer, Mother said, "We'll see what the Lord has in store. Now get back to your chores. Katie, did you peel the potatoes?"

Ephraim was still silhouetted in the barn door, and Isaac started toward him.

"Isaac."

He turned to his father. "Yes?"

"You'll change first."

It wasn't a question, so Isaac hurried into the house and toed off his sneakers, carrying them with him. It was like a dream to be climbing the stairs again and feeling the worn wood beneath his feet. His heart pounded against his ribs as he crept into his old room. Both the beds were neatly made, quilts pulled tightly over the pillows, but he had a feeling his and Nathan's bed hadn't been slept in since Nathan went to the hospital.

So many nights he'd lain there, dreaming of another life and cursing his brother's snores. *I should have known something was wrong with him.* He didn't know how, but he should have.

The dresser was the same too, and all his clothes were folded inside his drawers just as he'd left it. Had Mother put them back yesterday, hoping he'd agree to come back with them? Or had they left all his things untouched with the hope he'd return one day soon? Guilt flowed through him, heavy like quicksand.

Mother and Father would surely throw out his English clothes, so after Isaac stripped naked, he hid them away in the bottom of Nathan's trunk. Nathan wouldn't mind, he didn't think. He buttoned the flap on his pants and fastened the hooks at the neck of his shirt, his trembling fingers making it harder than it once had been. He brushed his short hair over his forehead as much as he could, wishing for a mirror. How easily he'd grown accustomed to English ways.

His hat was waiting on a peg by the door downstairs. The afternoon was warmer than it had been, so he left his coat behind after lacing up his boots. Ephraim wasn't waiting in the doorway anymore, and with each step closer to the barn, Isaac's dread grew. *He probably hates me.* He could feel his parents watching him as they went about their work, but at least they left him to speak to Ephraim alone.

The scratch of a broom on hay echoed in the musty air of the barn. Isaac stood just inside and watched his brother sweeping out a stall, hay flying with each forceful stroke. Like Katie, Ephraim was taller too. It had only been four months since Isaac had left home—which seemed impossible—but he swore Ephraim was bigger. He'd taken off his hat, and his sandy curls were a mess around his head.

"Are you just doing to stand there catching flies?"

Isaac started. "I…no." He hung his hat on a peg and grabbed another broom.

They swept side by side in silence, and soon Isaac swiped sweat from his brow. It felt surprisingly good. With all the studying he'd been doing, he'd missed physical work. Finally he ventured a few words. "How are you?"

Ephraim snorted. “Mad. Frustrated. Jealous. Sad.”

“I’m sorry.” The wood was smooth in Isaac’s grip where he squeezed. “I’ve wanted to talk to you so much. I wrote you.”

Ephraim’s head snapped up. For the first time he met Isaac’s gaze. “You really did?”

“Yes. More than once.”

With a curt shake of his head, Isaac went back to sweeping. “That’s what Anna said. Figures they didn’t give me the letters. What did you say?”

“That I miss you. That I’m sorry for leaving like that. That I hope one day you’ll forgive me.”

“Do you like it out there?”

“Yes. I like it a lot. I still miss things about home, but…I do like it. I’m going to school.”

“So you’re just back for a little bit?”

“While Nathan’s sick I want to help.”

Ephraim’s face creased. “I’ve only been able to see him in the hospital once. Do you think he’s going to die?”

Typical Ephraim, to ask flat out. Affection warmed Isaac. “I don’t know. I hope not. But I’ll tell you everything I find out.”

“Okay.” Ephraim moved into the far corner of the stall, still sweeping even though it was clean. “How’s Aaron?”

“Good. He came back with me.”

“He did?” Ephraim whirled to face Isaac, his mouth agape. “He’s here? Did he talk to them?”

“Yes—at the hospital yesterday. It didn’t go very well.”

“I bet.” Ephraim shook his head, smiling softly. “I’d love to see him again.”

“He’s staying at June’s. We can go over one day. She said she met you.”

“Yeah. She’s nice. Anna really likes her.”

“Anna, huh? Are you guys…”

Ephraim rolled his eyes. “We’re going steady, but it’s just pretend. We’re biding our time. The last thing she wants is to have to go home from the singings with one of the other boys. She won’t be Amish much longer if she can help it.”

“What about you?”

His gaze dropped. “I don’t know. I don’t think I want to stay in Zebulon, but…I’m not sure if I’d like living English either. It’s too… complicated.”

“You don’t have to decide anything right now. And you and Anna are just pretending?”

“Yeah. I guess.” Ephraim shrugged, but his cheeks were pink.

Isaac didn’t want to ask, but he had to. “How’s Mary doing?”

Ephraim met his gaze. “Okay, I guess. She was pretty messed up when you ran off with her brother.”

“I…” His knees went rubbery. *Does he know?*

“David’s staying at Aaron’s too, right? So I guess you see each other a lot. Does he like it there?”

Isaac’s heart clenched as he realized he didn’t truly know the answer. Putting everything that had happened between them aside, *did* David actually like it in San Francisco? Deep down, Isaac knew the answer—an answer to a question he hadn’t wanted to ask. He forced a smile for Ephraim. “Sure.”

“Is he coming back to visit too?”

“Yes. He’s on his way.” And in that moment, Isaac realized he didn’t care about what had happened with stupid Clark, or that David hadn’t told him the truth about how he’d been feeling, or that David had been drinking without telling him. He just wanted to hold him again.

“Hey, have you met any English girls out there?” Ephraim’s eyes gleamed. “Are they as wild as they seem?”

Isaac wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or not by the question. Part of him was, but part of him wanted his brother to know the truth. To see the real him. “I haven’t really had time.” He gazed around the barn, not meeting Ephraim’s gaze. “Do you need help washing out the pails?”

“Sure. Old Samuel Kauffman and his son have been coming by to help, but I still have a lot to do without Father here most days.” Ephraim walked out of the stall, and then spun around. “I’ve been really mad at you.”

“I know.” He bit his lip.

Ephraim rushed toward him, yanking Isaac into a hug so tight it almost knocked the air from his lungs. Isaac squeezed his eyes shut and hugged him back. Ephraim smelled like hay and sweat and old milk, and Isaac gripped him.

“Of course I forgive you. Just don’t leave again without saying goodbye,” Ephraim muttered.

“I won’t. I won’t.” Isaac stroked a hand over Ephraim’s curls, and his brother stooped to drop his head to Isaac’s shoulder.

“Promise?” His voice was muffled.

“Promise.”

Chapter Four

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Aaron pulled into the Byler's muddy driveway and put the rental car into park. "It's been a long day of travel. And a long night before that. You look like you could use some rest."

"I can't wait. I need to see Isaac." The sun was setting, splashing pink over the gray spring sky. When he and June had made it to the hospital only to be told Isaac had gone home with his parents, David had wanted to race after him. Even now he fought the urge to barge into the Byler's house and take Isaac away.

As if he could read his mind, Aaron quietly said, "He's not going to stay."

David gripped the door handle. "I know." He breathed in and out. "But I know he's been dying to see Katie and the boys again."

Aaron stared down the drive, as though he could see beyond the curve to the house and barn and his lost family. "I've never even met the little ones."

"Maybe…if you ask, your parents might…"

Gaze still distant, Aaron shook his head. "They won't. It wouldn't be fair anyway. I knew what I was losing when I chose to leave."

He'd never seen Aaron so withdrawn, and he hoped Jen wouldn't be delayed. She'd texted David to ask if he was okay and if the breathing exercises were helping. Her concern made him want to smile even when there was such little to smile about.

"Part of me wishes I could do that." Aaron nodded in the direction of the house. "Put on my old Amish clothes so I could see them."

As hard as it was for him and Isaac to come back, David could only imagine what it was like to be shunned. The ache of it rang through him like a bell. "I'm sorry." He shifted in his old clothing. "You could borrow something if you wanted. My clothes would fit you fine."

Aaron's jaw tightened, "No. When I left Red Hills I swore it was for good. I wasn't going to be one of those runners who couldn't make it stick. I promised myself I'd never put on those clothes again."

"All right. I understand."

He sighed. "But thank you for offering. I appreciate it." He stared at the muddy laneway. "I never lived here, but it still feels like coming to a home I'll never have again. Stupid, I know."

"Not stupid." He paused. "I know why Isaac and I left. But why did you?"

Aaron's sad smile was wistful. "I wasn't cut out for this life. I remember when I was little, and I'd go with Dad to deliver the milk to the dairy. All the trucks and machines and bustle. Everyone seemed busy and important, and I thought, One day I'll be one of those people. I never wanted to be a farmer. It was always too quiet at home. So much work to do when I knew there were English inventions that made it easy. It just never made sense to me. I couldn't understand it. I guess I still can't. Maybe I just don't want to."

David didn't know what to say. He nodded, even though Aaron's eyes were still on the horizon, where the pink sky was darkening to an orangey red.

"Is being gay the only reason you left?" Aaron asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so. No. I guess I'm still trying to figure it out. But even if I couldn't be with Isaac, I could never stay. I told myself I had to. I'd resigned myself to it. But I was miserable. I want… more. You know what I mean?"

He smiled. "I know exactly what you mean, David. You should go on now before it gets too dark."

"I guess I should." He ran a hand over his hair, wishing he'd been able to shower, but he'd been so anxious to see Isaac. And now that Isaac was at the end of the drive, he still hadn't opened the car door. He could hear his heart beating like it was stuck in his ears.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait until morning? Not that I don't want you to see Isaac now. I just know you won't be walking into an easy situation."

"I'm sure. He doesn't have his phone, and if I don't come he might think I don't care. Or that I don't want to see him after all."

Aaron shook his head. "He won't think that." He traced his fingers over the smooth leather of the steering wheel and cleared his throat. "So, Isaac told me a little about what happened with Clark. I'm going to have some choice words for Clark when we get home. I love him, but this was not okay. I'm sorry he hit on you like that, and I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt that you didn't want any of it."

David's mouth went dry. "I didn't. I swear." He met Aaron's gaze. "I would never."

"I believe you." He smiled softly. "I know how much you care about Isaac."

The relief was a warm rush, and David exhaled. "Thank you." He shifted on the squeaky leather seat. "I probably should have realized. Isaac never seemed to like him much, and now I know why."

"Isaac should have told you about what he overheard. He should have told you it upset him, and that Clark's intentions were…fucked up." He shook his head. "I believe that Clark feels really bad now, but Jesus. He shouldn't have messed with you."

"He said he was sorry. I think he really meant it. It seemed like he did. I forgave him." David frowned. "But maybe I shouldn't have. Is that dumb of me? Maybe I'm being too Amish."

"No. Not dumb at all." Aaron sighed. "I'm sure he did mean it. He's not a bad person. Just selfish and thoughtless sometimes, especially when it comes to his love life. Though he's also the kind of person who took the BART out to check on Jen's parents every single day and help them around the house after they got in a car accident when Jen and I were in Australia. He never complained once. But he crossed a big line here, and he's going to have to earn back that trust."

"People…they're complicated sometimes."

Aaron nodded with a chuckle. "You can say that again." He grew serious. "All right. Go make up with Isaac."

June's words as she'd sent him and Aaron on their way echoed in his mind. *"Go make up with your boyfriend, because you two are a pair of hangdogs."* "I will. I'm going to make it right."

"I know you will. You both will. You sure you'll get back to June's okay? Maybe you should take your phone."

"It wouldn't be right. I'll be fine. Got by for my whole life without one. Hard to believe sometimes, and I barely use my phone compared to other people."

"Yeah, technology's funny like that. Want me to drive up closer?"

"No. I'll walk." David unbuckled his seatbelt. "Unless you want to drive up and…see."

Aaron shook his head. "I don't belong here. It would make it worse for them. For me too."

"Thank you for bringing me. And for everything." Resolutely, David opened the door and hopped down into the slush.

The engine hummed and the tires splashed through puddles as Aaron turned and drove away with a wave. Shivering, David started up the Byler's driveway. His old Amish boots and coat had still been at June's, tucked on a shelf in his dormant workshop. His plain pants and shirt were terribly wrinkled, but he hadn't wanted to wait to iron them. Not that he knew how to iron. June surely would have offered, but she'd done enough.

He'd automatically skipped his underwear since he was putting on his plain clothes. It was both familiar and foreign to feel the rougher cotton of his pants brushing his privates. The strangest thing was to be wearing his Amish clothes without a hat. He ran his hand over his hair again, brushing his bangs forward as much as he could. He felt naked.

As he neared the Byler house, his heart galloped. Smoke curled toward the darkening sky, and the windows glowed with lantern light. In the distance, chickens clucked and horses neighed. A sheet fluttered

on the laundry line.

Home.

Even though it wasn't the house he'd lived in, they were almost all the same in Zebulon. He could imagine Kaffi bounding around the paddock, whinnying playfully. Anna's teasing tone as she made Mary laugh despite herself, and the sweet giggles of Sarah and the girls. Their mother scolding them, but smiling just a bit all the same.

He stopped and pressed his hands against his eyes. There was no time for tears now. Isaac needed him. And Lord, how he needed Isaac. So near, but out of reach. David couldn't rush to him and haul him into his arms. He couldn't kiss him or breathe in his smell that was different from everyone else in the world.

Soon.

Squaring his shoulders, David closed the distance to the house. When he knocked softly on the door, the murmurs inside ceased. He held his breath as he waited, smoothing down his hair again. With a scrape and creak, the door opened and Isaac's father filled the space.

"David Lantz."

He cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. Hello, Mr. Byler." He didn't know what to do with his hands, and clasped them behind his back.

Mr. Byler's gaze raked over him from head to toe and back again. "What do you want?"

"I…" His ears burned, and his skin prickled. Hatless and wrinkled, he was in no state to be paying a call to a neighbor's home.

"David?" Isaac's voice came from inside the house.

With a weary sigh, Mr. Byler stepped back, and Isaac edged around him, his face alight. He took a shuddering breath. "David. I'm so glad you came."

David could only nod for fear that he'd sob if he spoke.

"Let me tell you what's happening with Nathan." He reached back inside to grab his coat off a hook. "Please go ahead and have dinner without me, Father."

Mr. Byler opened his mouth, but Isaac rushed past him and tugged on David's sleeve. David could feel Mr. Byler's gaze boring into him as he and Isaac retreated some feet away. "Isaac," Mr. Byler intoned.

Isaac turned. "Yes, Father?"

He reached behind him, disappearing for a moment before holding out a black felt hat. "You forgot this."

After scurrying back, Isaac put on the hat and rejoined David. Then the door closed, and they were alone under the rising moon. They faced each other, and David reached for him before he could stop himself.

Isaac jammed his hands in his coat pockets. "You know they're

watching," he murmured.

David nodded and clasped his hands behind him again. "Sorry." He swallowed forcefully and made sure to keep his voice low. "There's so much I want to say…"

"Me too."

"I'm sorry, Isaac." David wanted to hang his head, but he met Isaac's gaze. "I'm so sorry. For what happened between us, and for Nathan. For everything."

"I don't care."

Inhaling sharply, David almost staggered in the muck. Would Isaac really not forgive him? "I…please, Isaac." His voice was barely audible.

"No, no—wait. That didn't sound right." Eyes glistening, Isaac shook his head. "I do care. Of course I do. I mean that it doesn't matter anymore. I'm upset about what happened, and there are important things we have to talk about, but right now I'm just so glad you're here. I want…" He glanced over his shoulder at the house. A curtain flickered. "But we can't. They'll see." He whispered, "I missed you so much the last few days."

"I did too." David surged with relief. "I tried to get here as soon as I could."

"I know. I'm sorry I left without you. I just had to get back. If Nathan…" He shuddered. "But I talked to him today, at least. He seems all right. As much as he can be, I guess."

"That's good. I'm glad."

"Have you gone home yet?"

David shook his head. "I needed to see you first. I…Isaac…"

"I know," Isaac murmured. "I know."

He dug his fingernails into his hands behind his back. "I want to hold you again," David whispered.

"I know. We will. We just have to be careful." He smiled sadly. "We've had lots of practice, at least."

"I can't believe we're here again." David waved a hand over them, indicated their Amish clothes. "I keep thinking I'll wake up and hear the bus down the street, and that you'll be beside me in our bed."

Isaac closed his eyes for a moment. "I want that. But I need to be here, at least for now. How's Aaron?"

"I don't know. Quiet. I think this is very hard for him."

Isaac sighed. "I hated leaving him behind today. But I had to. You understand, don't you? I had to see the kids."

"I understand. Aaron does too."

"Are you staying at June's, or are you going home?"

"I don't know." Despite his reaction when he saw the Byler's house, he knew that *home* wasn't in Zebulon anymore. "I don't know

how my mother will react."

"She loves you. She'll be glad to see you. Just like I am." Isaac smiled softly. Then he stood up straighter. "I could take you over there in the buggy. We could be alone for a bit."

Excitement whipped through him, and David nodded vigorously. "Will they let you?"

"Come on." In the darkness, Isaac squeezed David's fingers for a fleeting moment.

David followed Isaac inside, lingering by the front door. Down the short hallway he could see the living room with its wood-burning stove and twin rocking chairs for Isaac's parents. The family was still eating in the kitchen, and David could hear Isaac speak to them in German.

"I'm just going to drive David over to Eli Helmuth's. I'll hitch up Silver to my old buggy."

"At this hour?" Mrs. Byler asked.

"It won't take long. It's too far for him to walk."

There were a few moments of silence, and then Mr. Byler spoke. "It is your brother's buggy now."

"He can use it. I don't mind," Ephraim said, and gratitude warmed David.

Mr. Byler added, "But your mother's right. It's too late. No. He can find his own way tomorrow."

"But David needs to see his mother and sisters," Isaac said. "Surely you don't want to make Mrs. Lantz wait another day to see her son again?"

David had to smile just a bit. Not so long ago, Isaac likely would have backed down in the face of a plain *no* from his father. The silence from the kitchen grew long and weighty.

"Miriam surely will want to see her only son," Mr. Byler said quietly. "Do not dally. There's much work to be done in the morning before we go back to Nathan."

Exhaling the breath he'd been holding, David kept his expression neutral as Isaac returned. As David had guessed, Mr. Byler followed. David cleared this throat. "Thank you, sir."

Mr. Byler stared at him for several heartbeats. "I hope you have seen the error of your foolish ways and will obey your mother and the Lord once more. You came so close to joining the church and finding peace and salvation."

All David could do was nod and turn away, Isaac on his heels as they hurried to the barn. David glanced back as they reached it. Isaac's father remained in the doorway, a stark figure outlined in the warm light from inside. Then they were inside the barn, alone in the darkness.

For a moment, they stared at each other in the sliver of pale moonlight. With a scratchy breath, Isaac tossed his hat aside and threw himself into David's arms. He was warm and alive, and David inhaled him deeply, rubbing his cheek over Isaac's sandy hair. "*Eechel.* I missed you so much."

Isaac squeezed him tightly. "My David."

Their lips met, lightly at first, and then rough, as though they could devour each other whole. David dug his fingers into Isaac's shoulders, moaning as they kissed until his head spun. He ached to feel Isaac naked against him again, to taste him and touch him and hold him close for hours. But of course they couldn't. Not here.

As if reading his mind, Isaac leaned away, panting. "They'll come and see what's taking so long." He rubbed their noses together. "We have to…"

"Yes."

With a last lingering kiss, they separated. David licked his lips, wanting to keep every bit of Isaac he could. Isaac's eyes flashed, and he brushed David's mouth with his thumb before hurrying over to Silver's stall. Smiling, David watched him pet and coo to his old horse.

"Oh! I almost forgot." David reached into his pocket and handed Isaac the knife. "I know you don't carry it anymore, but I thought you might like it here. I had it in my bag, and June said security shouldn't have let me on the plane with it, but I guess they missed it." Isaac stared at the folded pocketknife in his palm, and David went on. "It was dumb. I can just take it back—"

"No. It wasn't dumb." Isaac closed his fingers around it. "Not at all. Thank you. Thank you for thinking of it. For thinking of me."

"Of course. I…I made so many mistakes. Isaac, I wish…"

"Shh." Isaac put his finger over David's lips. "We'll talk about it. We'll work it out. That's what we both want, right? You still want to be with me?"

"Yes." David cupped Isaac's cheek with his uncut hand. "Always."

Isaac turned his face and kissed David's palm. "Then we have plenty of time."

He led Silver outside and hitched her up. They climbed onto the buggy, and David could feel the weight of the Bylers watching as they lurched past the house and down the drive. It was both strange and wonderful to ride in a buggy again with Isaac at his side.

"You forgot your hat." David ran his hand over Isaac's hair. They were both dressed Amish, but not properly. The spring breeze cooled David's flushed cheeks, and he caressed Isaac's thigh as they turned onto the country road.

"It doesn't quite seem real."

"I know." For a moment, David breathed the fresh night air

deeply, so glad to be away from the noise and smog of the city. Then he heard his mother's wail of anguish as he ran from church.

"Why does God punish me? Please, David!"

The reality that he was actually going to see them again set in like an anchor plummeting into the deep. He'd concentrated on seeing Isaac again, and now that they were together, all the rest of his worries roared back. What would his mother say when she saw him again? What about Mary? *I failed them. I ran away. They must hate me. In heaven, Father must hate me too. I failed to do my duty.* He'd dreaded this moment for months, and now it was approaching like one of Isaac's freight trains. He had to face his mother and sisters after he abandoned them.

It was really happening.

Terror gripped him as the buggy bounced along, getting closer and closer to Eli Helmuth's farm. David's lungs stuttered, his vision narrowing. He lifted his hand from Isaac's thigh, his fists clenching. As an iron band clamped around his chest, blood rushed in his ears. *No, no, no.* He couldn't panic. Not now. Not with Isaac here to see…

"David?"

But hadn't that been the mistake he'd made so many times in San Francisco? He dragged in a desperate breath and pushed the words out, barely a whisper. "I'm scared." God, he was so weak and pathetic. He shouldn't have said it. He shouldn't have—

"Of course you are. I am too." Isaac loosened the reins and curled his fingers over David's. "They'll be glad to see you." Then Isaac leaned over, and his voice rose. "David?"

The buggy wheels clattered as Isaac spurred Silver and turned off onto a side road that disappeared through a swath of trees. He hauled Silver to a stop and took David's face in his hands. David was shaking, but he couldn't stop.

"What's wrong? It's all right." Isaac kissed him tenderly. "Don't be afraid. I'm here."

Gasping, David buried his face in Isaac's neck, going limp as Isaac stroked his back and murmured nothing words to him. He didn't know how much time passed as he trembled and struggled for air, waiting for the worst to pass. It had been mild compared to the previous attacks, but he was drained all the same.

"I'm sorry," David finally whispered, tasting salt on his lips and rubbing at his eyes. "I didn't want you to see me like this."

Isaac ran his fingers through David's hair, and his voice was thick. "Why not? You've held me while I cried. You don't have to be strong all the time, my David. Trust me. Let me help you."

He clung to Isaac and let himself be rocked and soothed. It felt so *good* to let go. He wished more than anything that he and Isaac could

go home to their bed and curl up together all night. He wanted to count Isaac's freckles and watch him dream of sweet things. David wondered if he looked as innocent and free as Isaac did when he slept. He doubted it.

When he could breathe normally again, he sat up, swiping his eyes with his sleeve. "I do trust you, Isaac. I do."

"Is this what happened in San Francisco? You said you felt like you were dying sometimes." Isaac took David's hand, and then frowned. "What happened?" He skimmed his fingertips over the nicks on David's palms.

David flushed as he remembered throwing the empty bottle in his workhouse, alone and lost. Wallowing in self-pity. "Broken glass. It's fine." He hadn't bothered putting on fresh Band-Aids at June's.

But Isaac was still frowning. "It's not fine. It must have hurt."

"I hardly felt it." It was the truth, at least.

Reverently, Isaac pressed his lips to each tiny cut. "Kiss it better," he murmured.

Tears prickled David's eyes again. "You make everything better."

"Is this what happened when you felt bad and drank?"

He nodded. "I talked to Jen about it before I came here. She said it's called a panic attack. It happens to other people too sometimes. It's a relief that it's not only me, and it isn't anything worse."

"I wish you'd told me." Isaac's eyes shone. "I'm mad at you for not telling me."

"I should have. I don't blame you if you can't trust me now."

Isaac swallowed hard. "I hated seeing you with Clark."

"I didn't want it to happen. I swear I didn't." David wanted to hurl himself to his knees and beg. "Please forgive me."

"Nothing else happened with him?"

"*Nothing*. And it never will. He kissed me, like you saw. Then I stopped him. I only want you, Isaac. Only you. Forever. Please don't doubt that."

Isaac smiled tremulously. "I believe you. I should have believed you when you told me. I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

Isaac shook his head. "It's *not*. I should have believed you. I should have talked more about it instead of pushing you away. We haven't talked enough. We need to, even when it's about something we don't like."

"I know. We do. It…it really hurt that you thought I could cheat on you."

Isaac threaded their fingers together. "I'm sorry. I know you would never."

David had to ask—had to hear Isaac say it. "Do you forgive me?"

“Of course. We both made mistakes.” Isaac’s lips pressed into a thin line. “I don’t know if I'm ready to forgive Clark though.”

“I don’t blame you. I told Clark I would never want him that way and that if he wanted to be friends it could never happen again. He said he understood.”

“Oh, I bet he said that. And he’ll just wait for some other opportunity to try again.”

“I don’t know. I think he’s sincerely sorry. He came to the workshop the next morning to apologize, and he said he wants to apologize to you too. He seemed really embarrassed by the way he acted.”

Isaac sighed. “I guess I should forgive him. It’s what we’re supposed to do. ”

“You don’t have to. Not if you don’t really feel it. We aren’t Amish anymore, are we?” Another question rattled around in his mind. Before, he wouldn’t have asked. He would have just shoved it away and not risked upsetting Isaac. But David thought of what Isaac had told June about being spoiled. He squeezed Isaac’s fingers. “Why didn’t you tell me what Clark said in the bathroom that first night at the bar?”

Isaac kept his gaze down. “I don’t know.”

“It…it upsets me that you didn’t tell me.”

“I know. It should.” He looked up. “It was so glaring to me. I resented that you didn’t seem to notice. But I know that’s not fair. I thought…I guess I thought maybe you liked it—that he was hitting on you.”

“I honestly had no idea he was. Sometimes he made those sexual comments, but he’s like that with everyone.”

“I should have told you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s finished now. Clark knows he can never do anything like that again. And we don’t have to hang out with him anymore.”

“Maybe not for a while. I need to see if I can forgive him first.” Isaac sighed. “San Francisco feels so far away. I never thought we’d be back in a buggy.”

“Me either.” He wrapped his arms around Isaac, and they held each other. Pressing his lips to the pulse in Isaac’s throat, David listened to the tree branches rattle in the wind. His voice was muffled in Isaac’s skin. “I love you, Eechel.”

“I love you too. We’ll get through this. All of it.” He drew back and kissed David’s cheek. “We should go.”

Nodding, David forced himself out of Isaac’s arms. “We’ll get through this,” he echoed.

As they started for the Helmuth farm again, David had never been

so glad to have Isaac at his side.

#

The rattle of the buggy announced their arrival, and as they neared the house, David spotted his mother. She leaned on a cane behind Eli Helmuth in the open doorway, and at the kitchen window he could see the faces of his sisters as they crowded together, peeking out from the black curtains, their noses pressed to the glass.

"Just breathe. It's okay. I'm right here." Isaac gave David's hand a final squeeze before letting go as he reined in Silver.

Nodding, David concentrated on inhaling and exhaling. This was it. No turning back. He fumbled with the latch on the buggy door and climbed down. Isaac joined him, and they met Eli halfway to the house, David's mother hobbling a few steps behind.

"David. Isaac." Eli nodded, his wrinkled face impassive. "Isaac, how does your brother fare?"

"All right. He's very sick, though."

"Indeed. We are all praying for him." Eli stroked his long beard, dark with silver shot through it. He was more heavyset than David remembered. Mother was feeding him well.

David smiled at her tentatively. "Hello, Mother."

Her hand trembled where she gripped the cane. "David." She had the same dark hair and blue eyes David did, and seeing her again brought a lump to his throat. Her white cap shone in the moonlight.

"I'm glad to see you walking again. How are you feeling?"

"Well enough."

"Congratulations on your marriage," Isaac said. "I was glad to hear of it."

"So was I." David wondered if he should shake Eli's hand.

"Are you coming home? Are you ready to repent?" Mother asked. "Please, David. Come home. We miss you."

David's throat clenched. Before he could try to eke out an answer, Anna's voice rang out. She was striding toward them while Mary scurried after her, hissing Anna's name. Their white caps covered almost-identical golden hair. They'd always looked practically like twins, Mary barely a year older.

"I don't want to wait to say hello to my own brother," Anna stated. With a smile, she marched right past Mother and Eli and pulled David into a hug.

He held her gratefully. "I missed you."

"Missed you too. We all did." Anna stepped back and glanced at Mother. "Are you going to come inside?"

"I…" Was he?

"Of course," Eli answered.

Mary lingered a few steps behind. Her lips trembled, and she

barely smiled at David before ducking her head. David could feel Isaac's tension beside him.

Isaac cleared his throat. "I should go. They'll wonder where I am. Oh, but how will you get back?"

"I'll figure it out. Go ahead."

"I'll drive him," Anna offered.

Eli shook his head. "If David is not staying, I will take him where he needs to go."

Isaac nodded his goodbyes, and David followed him to the buggy. He whispered, "I'll see you at the hospital tomorrow. I promise."

"Okay. Just remember you're not alone."

"You either."

With a fleeting smile, Isaac clambered up and turned the buggy in a wide loop. David wanted to watch him go, but it might seem strange. He hurried back, his hands in his coat pockets.

"You're not wearing a hat," Mother observed.

"I don't have one with me." He shifted from foot to foot, thinking of how he'd raced from church through Samuel Schrock's living room and out into the snow, leaving his hat and everything—everyone—but Isaac behind.

She turned and started back toward the house, leaning heavily on the cane with a shuffling motion. "It's not proper for a man to be without a hat."

Anna caught his gaze and rolled her eyes as they followed. Eli was silent, and Mary had gone ahead to help their mother through the door. David had been to Eli Helmuth's when it had been Eli's turn to host church, but when he walked inside and removed his boots and coat, he was struck by a strange sense of familiarity.

There was the rocking chair he'd made Mother, and the wood carrier he'd crafted by the stove. He'd known Mother and the girls lived with Eli now, and that Joseph Yoder had bought their old house. But knowing and seeing were different things. With a pang, David thought of the barn where he and Isaac had spent so many hours.

Sarah, his youngest sister, appeared from the kitchen, Elizabeth and Rebecca on her heels. They were all under eleven, and while Elizabeth and Rebecca had their father's light hair, seven-year-old Sarah's gentle curls were dark. David's heart skipped as Sarah threw her arms about his waist.

"Where have you been?" she cried. "I thought the bad world swallowed you up."

He squatted down and brushed her cheek. "Nope. I'm just fine." Maybe not exactly true, but he would be.

"You look the same." Sarah's gaze roved over him. "I thought you might have horns now. But you're still David."

He wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. "Still me. Same old brother. I've missed you all. Have you missed me?" Elizabeth and Rebecca rushed forward to hug him, their eyes darting to Mother before they hurriedly stepped back. He smiled at them. "It's so good to see you again."

"Girls, time for bed." Eli helped Mother to her chair by the fire, and pulled out a stool so she could prop up her legs.

The little ones did as they were told and climbed the stairs. Mary tugged Anna's arm, but Anna stood firm. Mother glared.

"All of you. Do as you are told."

Anna huffed, her bare feet slapping the wood as she pounded up the stairs. Mary hesitated. "David?"

"Yes?" His pulse zoomed.

"I'm glad to see you again. Both of you."

He opened his mouth to reply, but she was gone upstairs, hardly making a sound. Eli sat in his own rocker and motioned to another chair. David sat, running his fingers over the wood he'd sanded and molded. They'd all taken off their socks as was custom, and he wriggled his toes until he realized he was fidgeting. Folding his hands in this lap, he waited.

And waited. If there was one thing the Amish had in spades, it was patience.

A clock ticked loudly, and David wondered when they'd wound it last. How accustomed he'd become to digital readouts. He cleared his throat. "Does your leg still hurt?" He tried to push away the image of her bloody and broken in the snow.

"Yes. They are getting better, though."

"Good." His stomach churned. "Do you need more money for the bills? I—"

"It is no longer your concern. I've taken care of it." Eli began packing tobacco into his pipe.

Another silence descended. Distantly he heard wood creak, and could imagine Anna at the top of the stairs, listening avidly. He smiled softly.

"It makes you happy, does it?" Mother asked, her voice wavering. "Turning your back on your family and the Lord? Being a sinner out in the world?"

"No. I mean…" David scrubbed a hand through his hair. "I do like it. Living in the world. Isaac and I…" *Careful.*

Her lips pressed together. "I always thought Isaac Byler was a good boy. Look at what he's done. You wouldn't have left if he didn't put ideas in your head. Him and that English woman. And after Isaac got Mary's hopes up."

David struggled to keep calm. "He didn't get Mary's hopes up. He

never drove her home from the singings even once. And it was my choice to leave. It didn't come out of nowhere, Mother."

"No. That English woman helped too."

Eli struck a match and lit his pipe with an expert puff. "David, you know there is only one way to heaven. You must turn away from worldly sin and rejoin your community. Confess your sins and make amends."

David wanted to tell them that it was impossible. That while he could give up electricity and movies and the rest of the world if he really had to, he could never give up Isaac. Even without Isaac, how could he give up the freedom to finally be himself? To be accepted? Living in the English world was about so much more than cars and modern conveniences. Yet even if he could tell them the truth, they would just say he had to repent his sins. Their answer would always be to return to the plain life.

"Maybe it is the only way to heaven. But I can't come back. That's not why I'm here. I came to support Isaac and Aaron. And of course I wanted to see you all. I wanted that very badly. I miss you so much. But you have to know I'll never live here again."

Mother's shoulders jerked with a sudden sob, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. Sweet smoke wafted through the air, and Eli rocked in his chair steadily. Mother inhaled deeply. "You've broken my heart, David. So stubborn. Like your brother."

David flinched. She'd hardly mentioned Joshua since his death. "I'm sorry I left the way I did, but I knew I'd never be happy here. I couldn't make that commitment to the church—it would have been wrong. It would have been a lie. Please, can't you understand?"

She gazed at him with wet eyes. "No. You have turned your back on your family. Run away into the arms of the devil. I will never understand. I will pray until my dying day that you will come to your senses and return to us."

With that, she struggled out of her chair, Eli helping her while David jumped to his feet and hovered uselessly. He waited while Eli helped her upstairs, wishing he could run back to June's. It was only a few miles. Or perhaps he could take Kaffi, but no—he wasn't his anymore.

On tiptoes, Anna appeared, her cap askew. She reached for his hand, whispering, "Mother hasn't let me out of her sight lately. I tried to get to June's to call about Nathan. I'm so glad you came back." She glanced up the stairs. "Not that it'll be easy. Are you okay? I heard everything."

He tucked a stray lock of golden hair behind her ear. "I've missed you so much."

"Duh. But are you okay?" She peered at him with brows drawn

together. “You look like you haven’t slept in days. Is Isaac really staying with his family?”

He nodded. “It’s the only way they’ll let him see Ephraim and the others. They want to get him away from Aaron.”

Her eyes widened. “Did Aaron come back too? How did that go?”

“Just like you’d imagine.” He heard footsteps upstairs, and hugged Anna close. “Forget me. What about you?”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Surviving. Each day I grow more sure. I’m leaving when the time is right.”

“I’ll help you. Just tell me when.”

Anna stepped back just as Eli appeared. She nodded to David and dashed back upstairs with an apologetic smile to Eli, who sighed.

“She reminds me of a horse I once had. Wouldn’t pull the plow no matter how much I coaxed or threatened.”

“What did you do with it in the end?”

Eli shrugged. “Let it run free. What else was there to do? Come now. I’ll take you where you want to go.”

They rode in silence to June’s farm. David winced as a car came up behind them, but it slowed and passed them easily. He cleared his throat. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for my mother and sisters.”

“It is I who should thank you.”

David blinked. “I don’t understand.”

Eli smiled softly. “Not that I thank you for your sin. That I must condemn with great sadness. But my life had grown empty. I was alone, and now my home is filled once more. A wife and children are a man’s greatest blessings on this earth. My own children are parents themselves now. I have grandchildren, but to have your sisters under my roof warms me even in the bitterest of winters. I wake with a smile. You never have to worry for their wellbeing. It is my burden now, and a glad one.”

“I…I don’t know what to say.” David took a deep breath, sure that part of the heaviness in his chest melted away, leaving him breathing more easily.

“Say you will pray for the Lord to bring you back to the right path. Think on it. Say you will do that.”

He thought of what June had said about *her* God loving people just as they were. Was his God out there? For the first time, David really imagined that maybe God really could be something other than Amish. The world was so vast, and the Amish were such a tiny part of it. There were so many Christian faiths, and maybe none of them were wrong. Surely there had to be more to it than what the Ordnung dictated?

“I will.” It wasn’t a lie—not exactly.

“Then I ask nothing else of you.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, and David said a silent prayer indeed, thanking God for Eli Helmuth.

Chapter Five

As Isaac opened his eyes, the faint light of the impending dawn brightened the small square window. His breath caught, and for a moment he was sure it had all been a dream—David, San Francisco, school, his new life. Because here he was in his old bed in Zebulon, waking to the same little square of glass and worn dresser against the wall.

Yet this time, the other side of the bed was cold, and the only sound that reached his ears was soft breathing from the far side of the room. No Nathan. No snoring. Not this time. Isaac braced against the surge of guilt.

And David wasn't beside him either, sprawled on his stomach, not realizing how much room he took up in his sleep. Isaac hadn't minded at all—he'd liked how David's leg pressed against him, or his arm flopped over him, his breath tickling Isaac's nose. He'd loved how some mornings David had woken blearily, and then his whole face had brightened like the sunrise as he focused on Isaac.

Longing burned through him, and Isaac squeezed his eyes shut. First he'd shared a bed with Aaron, and then Nathan, and then shared so much more with David. The loneliness was foolish, but it swelled in him. Here he was feeling sorry for himself when his brother could be dying.

"What's wrong?" Ephraim whispered.

Isaac opened his eyes as he rolled to face the other bed. He could just make out Ephraim watching him in the gloom. Joseph slept on, tucked close to the wall beyond Ephraim. As Isaac had suspected, neither had wanted to take Nathan's empty bed, even though Ephraim longed for a bed of his own. It hadn't been slept in since Nathan collapsed, and now here was Isaac back in it alone. "I should have known. That he was sick."

Ephraim huffed. "Shut up. No one knew. Not even Nathan."

Isaac tried to smile. "True."

Floorboards creaked in the hallway, and they listened to Father's heavy footsteps descend the stairs. The rooster wouldn't crow for some time, but the day had begun. Mother would bustle about shortly, and Isaac could almost smell the cooking grease from the bacon already. "I never get up this early anymore."

"I bet." Ephraim chuckled. "Even if I went into the world, I think my brain would wake me up anyway."

"Do you want to? Go into the world?" Isaac wasn't sure what answer he wanted to hear.

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. I think I want to leave Zebulon, but…"

"But what?"

"But…I like farming. I can see myself with a house of my own, and a wife and children. It's fun to look at Anna's magazines and sneak off to do English things, but now with Nathan, it just…it makes me think. You know? That maybe things aren't so bad. I used to get so fed up with Mother and Father and all the rules. But isn't it scary out there without them?"

"Sometimes."

"Even if I go back to Red Hills, or to another settlement, I'd still be losing so much." He was silent for a long moment, and his voice trembled. "I don't think I can stand it if Nathan died. It's bad enough without you. At least I know you're out there somewhere with Aaron. That's something, at least. As much as I understand why you left, I hate that you're gone. I know, it's not fair of me."

"I don't blame you. I'd feel the same."

"Is it worth it? Leaving your family behind?"

"I don't know," Isaac whispered. "Yes. But sometimes no." He ran his fingers over the squares of the quilt on his bed. As sunrise neared, pale gray light brightened the room, and Ephraim watched him intently. "But I'm not the one making it like this."

"But you chose to run away."

"Yes, but I *had* no real choice. I…" Isaac clenched his hands. He wanted to tell Ephraim the truth, but would it help? Or only make it worse? "That's the problem. There's only one way here. Amish or English, and no in-between. I still want to see you all. I don't want to be cut off. I don't want to leave my family behind. They make it this way. Our parents and the community. They think it's the right thing, but it isn't fair."

"I know. If I go back to Red Hills, things will never be the same again with Mother and Father."

"Exactly!" Isaac's voice rose before he hushed himself, glancing at Joseph still sleeping. "I want to write letters and visit. It's like with Aaron! All these years he's wanted to see us again, and they wouldn't allow it. That wasn't his choice."

Ephraim leaned in closer. "What's he like? Does he have a good life?"

"He's wonderful. He's so generous, and he does have a good life. A very good life. His wife is a doctor, and they make each other laugh all the time. They have a nice house, and they made sure there was room for us if we needed it."

Ephraim was quiet for a moment. "For me too?"

Isaac's heart skipped. "Of course. If you ever want to leave, he'll

help you. I will too."

"I don't know what I want." His brows drew together. "What's so great about the world? Technology and stuff like that, sure, but we don't really need it."

"It's more than that. It's…freedom. Choice."

Ephraim nodded, and looked about to say more when Joseph mumbled and groaned, pushing himself up on his hand. He would be nine this year, which Isaac could scarcely believe.

He rubbed his face blearily, and then a sweet smile brightened his face. "Isaac. You're still here." Then his smile faded as he took in the empty spot where Nathan should have slept.

Ephraim yanked back the quilt. "Better get to work. I'm late already."

Isaac wished they could stay in bed talking, but Ephraim was already fastening the flap on his pants and flying out the door.

Somehow, Isaac had forgotten just how much work there was to do. Milking and milking and milking, and bottling, and cleaning, and a thousand little things—and those were only the pre-breakfast chores. By the time he dragged himself into the kitchen with a yawn, he wanted a shower desperately. He rolled up the sleeves of his gray shirt and washed his hands in the basin. He sure as heck hadn't missed the outhouse, and the lack of running water even to wash up was something he'd quickly taken for granted in the city.

Mother was at the well, and Katie stood by the stove barefoot, stirring a pot of oatmeal while bacon and eggs crackled in a greasy pan. She smiled brightly. "Are you hungry?"

"Does a dog have a tail?" Isaac had removed his boots at the door, and he flexed his toes against the floorboards. His feet ached already, and he realized just how little physical work he'd been doing in San Francisco.

Katie giggled and held out the spoon. "Do you want a taste?"

The hot sugary oatmeal was thick and wonderful. He groaned. "So good." He realized that the wooden spoon was the one he'd made Mother years ago, and for some reason it warmed him. He eyed the stack of pots and pans on the counter. "Do you want help putting those away?"

"No. I have to give them back to the neighbors. There's practically been more food than there is when Mother's home all day."

The warmth in Isaac grew. He wondered if city neighbors ever helped out as much as Amish. While Katie finished up, Isaac surveyed the table. It was exactly as he remembered—a little battered, with a bench on either side. And as he remembered, there were three place settings on one side and four on the other. There would only be six of them today, but he supposed Katie had set Nathan's place from habit.

Still stirring, she followed his gaze. “He’ll be back soon. I just know it. God will bring him home.”

Isaac nodded. “I hope so. Should I sit in my old spot?”

“Of course. It’s always set for you.”

He blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

“We always set your place for you.”

“Since I left? You…for every meal?” His throat was thick.

She nodded. “Every day we pray for you to come back.”

The thought that at every single meal his place had sat there, untouched and empty, made his stomach knot. He hadn’t thought of his family as often—that was certain. He’d been swept up in David and the city and his new life. Now, standing in the kitchen, he could see for himself the hole he’d left behind. His eyes flicked to Nathan’s spot. *Please, God. Let him live.*

“Isaac? Are you okay?” Katie’s eyes were wide.

He forced a breath and managed to keep his voice even. “Yes. I’m fine. So, do you miss school? You’re doing such a wonderful job here so Mother can go to the hospital.”

“Thank you. I do miss it.” She brought down the bowls and began dishing out the oatmeal. “We were learning how to write a proper letter. But Mother said she’d show me.”

“You could write to me to practice.”

“Okay.” She smiled, but then her lip trembled. “But Isaac, aren’t you coming back to stay? You won’t really leave again, will you?”

“Katie, I…I wish I could. But I can’t stay for good.”

She dropped the spoon with a thunk into the pot. “But Isaac! You won’t go to heaven!” Tears filled her eyes. “I’m so scared for you. Aren’t you scared? You can’t go back out there. You’ll go to hell.”

“It’s all right. I’m not scared.” He drew her into his arms and rubbed her back. “Shh. Don’t cry. I promise I’ll be okay. When you’re older you’ll see that sometimes God puts us on a different path. Don’t worry about me.” He kissed her head and rested his cheek against her pale hair.

Sniffling, Katie clung to him. “I don’t want you to go to hell, Isaac. You have to come back and join the church. Josiah’s Rachel told me so. Everyone says it’s true.”

“I think there’s more than one way to heaven.”

“Isaac.” Mother’s sharp voice made him jump. She watched from the doorway with a pail in her hand. “Don’t speak such things in this house.”

Nodding, he gave Katie a last pat and stepped back. He wanted to say that it was true—that it *had* to be true—but there was no point. “I’m sorry.”

Ephraim, Joseph, and Father came in, and soon they stood around

the table and said the silent prayer. Isaac sped through the usual Lord's Prayer and added a few extra lines.

Please make Nathan well, and guide me and David to our true home, wherever that might be.

#

By the time they made it to the hospital, Isaac was ready to crawl out of his skin. In a car it would have taken a quarter of the time at most, and it was amazing how quickly he'd gotten used to the convenience. All those years of a horse and buggy, but after a few months of cars and buses, he couldn't imagine going back.

As he walked with his parents across the lot, he pulled down the brim of his hat to shade against the sun. It was turning into a brilliant spring day, and birds chirped merrily. The thought that he could see Nathan again, and that David would be waiting for him inside made him want to race ahead, but he kept pace with Mother and Father through the sliding doors.

Inside, the cheeriness of the day evaporated. The air felt heavier, like it was as gray as the floor and walls. A light flickered in the stairwell as they trudged up to the third floor in silence. Isaac had the stupid thought that they were going into battle, and he supposed they were. Against cancer. The world. Each other.

When he entered the hall, his gaze immediately found David by Nathan's door, and Isaac smiled automatically. But it vanished as he took in David's hunched shoulders and downcast eyes. Then Isaac focused on the other people in the hall—Aaron in the corner with his arms crossed and lips thin, and the black-clad forms of Bishop Yoder and Deacon Stoltzfus, who seemed to take up so much room in the corridor that for a moment Isaac wondered if they'd somehow grown taller.

The absurd thought that he should run reverberated in Isaac's mind before he banished it. He made his feet move, his Amish boots heavy on the worn tile as he followed Mother and Father. A man in a wheelchair dragging a little tank of air stared as they skirted around him.

Nathan's room was at the end of the hall, which was a good thing considering how many visitors he had that morning. Of course the bishop and deacon weren't there to bring him a sweet treat or best wishes from the congregation. They held their hats in their hands, and Isaac took off his and brushed his hair forward as best he could. Aaron's smile was tight when he caught his eye.

Aaron mouthed, "*Okay*?"

Isaac nodded. He mouthed back, "*You*?"

Aaron nodded, but Isaac wasn't sure he believed him. He raised his eyebrows, and Aaron relaxed for a moment, giving him a flicker of

a real smile. He nodded again.

David still stared at his sneakers, and Isaac willed him to look up. *Is he mad at me?* It was silent as the seconds ticked by, and Isaac fidgeted, reaching into his pants pocket to close his fingers over the folding knife. He wished he had something to carve, and a pang of missing carpentry tolled through him. Everything in the city had been so new and shiny, and he'd hardly known where to start. It had never been easy, yet now when he looked back on those days with David in the Lantz barn, it seemed so peaceful and simple as anything.

"How's Nathan?" he asked, shocked at the sound of his own voice. He hadn't meant to say it aloud.

Bishop Yoder regarded him with a hawk's precision. He was tall and thin, his white hair wispy and beard wiry. "The Lord is sending Nathan strength and courage. We pray for his full recovery and God's blessing."

"He's in chemo," Aaron said. "He's hanging in there."

The bishop went on as if Aaron wasn't there at all. "Isaac, how good to see you yielding to the Lord and obeying your parents. I know how heavy their hearts have been in your absence."

What was he supposed to say to that? "Uh, thank you." He willed David to look at him, but David's chin was still down.

"The Lord has a plan for everything, Isaac. Now He has brought you home. It is as it should be." Bishop Yoder glanced at David. "We hope your good influence will help David return to the right path as well."

An English phrase popped into Isaac's mind as he glanced at the deacon. *If looks could kill*. The deacon glowered at pretty much everyone, but he stared at David so hard that Isaac half expected David's hair to start smoking. Deacon Stoltzfus was a barrel of a man, his dark beard heavy and hanging to mid-chest. His fingers were stubby where he gripped the brim of his black hat.

A harried older woman in a flapping white coat appeared, flipping pages on a clipboard. Her blonde hair was cropped short and her name tag read *Dr. Anita Tyler*. "Mr. and Mrs. Byler, I'd like to talk to you about our latest test results." She glanced up and seemed to notice everyone else for the first time. "Ah. I see Nathan has quite a few visitors today. Remember that he needs his rest. No more than three people at a time, please. In fact, I think most of you should come back another day. He won't be up for visitors after this round of chemo."

Aaron brushed by the bishop and deacon. "Do you have the test results for me and Isaac?"

"Not yet. The lab's backed up. Dr. Beharry at the Mayo Clinic will be following up to try and light a fire under them. He's one of the very

best oncologists in the country, and he's also a pit bull, which is great for Nathan." Dr. Tyler consulted her clipboard again. "Mr. and Mrs. Byler, if we could speak privately?" She ushered them into Nathan's empty room.

"How are they paying for all this?" Isaac asked, not sure who he was asking.

"The community will provide. We take care of our own," Deacon Stoltzfus answered. Isaac was surprised that his voice sounded so calm and reasonable and wasn't merely a growl. "We are obedient to the Lord, and He provides."

David still stared at his feet. "My mother wrote a letter to the paper, asking people to send what they can. Like your mother did when…after the accident."

"Oh. Good." Isaac smiled tentatively, but David didn't look up.

Aaron's phone buzzed, and he pulled it from his pocket, defiant as he stared down the bishop and answered it. "Hey. Yeah. Hold on a second." To Isaac and David he said, "I'll be back." He strode down the hall and disappeared around a corner.

"You must turn away from sin. From the path of the devil." Bishop Yoder's thin face creased, and he appeared truly pained. "I pray you will both repent and return to your families. The loss of even one child is too much for Zebulon to bear. This has been torment for all of us. We will speak with you further soon."

With that he marched away, the deacon on his heels. Isaac exhaled, and then David started down the hall too. He disappeared into the bathroom, and Isaac followed. Did David want to see him? Maybe something had happened, or maybe—

"Finally." As the door shut behind Isaac, David was there, his pale blue eyes intent as he snatched Isaac's hat and took Isaac's face in his hands, kissing him deeply. Fortunately the bathroom was empty, and David tugged him into one of the stalls, squeezing over the toilet so they could both shuffle inside and latch the door.

Then Isaac's back was against it, and David pressed close, kissing him again tenderly. "Hi," he breathed. He hung Isaac's hat on a hook on the side of the stall.

"Hi." Isaac had to smile as he ran his hands over David's back, squeezing through the soft cotton of his plaid shirt. "You wouldn't look at me. I thought maybe you were mad."

David's breath puffed warm over Isaac's cheek. "I was afraid if I looked at you they'd see. We hid it for so long, but I don't think I can now. Especially not when I miss you so much." He nuzzled Isaac's neck.

The scrape of David's stubble was reassuring and exciting at the same time. "I know." Isaac wound his fingers through David's hair,

and spread his legs so David's thigh could fit neatly between them. "I have to see you alone. There's so much we need to talk about. There's just…so much of everything." He sneaked his hand under David's shirt, touching his skin.

"Careful, or we might get arrested for doing something naughty in a public place."

Isaac laughed, and it felt so good. For the moment, he let himself forget about cancer and preachers and his parents' expectations. "Promise?"

David laughed too, and then they froze as the door opened with a rush of noise from the hallway—footsteps and a squeaky wheel of some kind, and a static-filled voice saying something over the loudspeaker. Isaac dug his fingers into David's bare back, and they stared at each other, listening as a zipper was pulled down. They exhaled in unison, and Isaac couldn't resist rocking his hips against David's thigh. He was getting hard, but it was more than that. He would have been content to just press against David from head to toe and breathe him in.

David bit back a laugh as they listened to the stranger pee at the urinal, and Isaac pressed his lips to David's cheek. It felt so right being together again. He knew they had problems they needed to face, but there was a sense of certainty growing deep inside him that felt sturdy and right. A certainty that despite whatever mistakes they made, this thing between them was solid and sure, rooted deep into the earth like the roots of a tree. No matter what happened, they'd face it together.

As the man left the bathroom, David smiled tentatively. "What?"

"Nothing. Everything." Isaac realized he was smiling. "We're okay. We're still here. They can't change that. No one can change that if we don't let them." He shook his head. "I'm probably not making any sense."

"You are." David kissed Isaac's forehead. "We won't let them. Not anyone."

For a minute, they just held each other, and Isaac closed his eyes as he rubbed his cheek against the soft flannel of David's shirt. "I guess we should go. I want to talk to Aaron." He raised his head.

With a smile, David ran his thumb over Isaac's lower lip. "Do you think you can get away tonight? Meet me in the woods by June's. Can you take Silver?"

"Yes. I'll find a way. Midnight."

They kissed again, and slipped back out into the hall. Aaron was saying something to their stony-faced parents by the door to Nathan's room. The warmth he'd gained from the peaceful, giddy respite with David vanished, and Isaac kept his own eyes on the floor now. David was right. If they weren't careful everyone would see, and Isaac didn't

want to even imagine what would happen then.

#

It was late afternoon by the time Isaac approached the Miller farm. The old buggy jostled him as a wheel caught a spring pothole, and he reined in Silver by John Miller's house. Mervin's older brother was likely out in the fields, and as Isaac climbed down from the buggy, he spotted John's wife in the kitchen window. She didn't wave, but he lifted a hand anyway.

John's house had been built a few hundred yards from his parents' home, and as Isaac approached, memories rolled through his mind. He and Mervin with muddy knees being scolded by Mrs. Miller, who still gave them sugar cookies even though they always ran and never walked.

Isaac stopped in his tracks, the fear gnawing at him outweighing the urge to see his best friend again. Mervin was probably still out in the fields anyway, and maybe that was best. He scuffed his shoe in the dirt, feeling curious eyes on him, but seeing no one. His face flushed, and he realized he looked like an idiot just standing there. He had to stay or go. Just turn around and—

"Isaac Byler." Jacob Miller's voice rang out from the direction of the barn. He strode over, wiping his hands on an old cloth. Isaac forced his feet to move and meet Jacob. They stopped a few feet from each other. Beneath his black hat, Jacob had Mervin's fine reddish hair, but he was taller and leaner.

Isaac extended his hand. "Hello, Jacob."

After a heartbeat, Jacob took it, squeezing hard. "Isaac. What do you want?" Jacob exhaled through his nose. "I mean…what brings you here? We heard you were back, but Mervin didn't seem to think you'd come by."

It shouldn't have hurt, but his stomach clenched like he'd been kicked by a mule. "I…oh. I can leave if you want. I just wanted to see how you all are." *I wanted to see if my best friend hates me.*

"We're fine. Working hard and living by God's word, as it should be."

"How are Ruth and Atlee?" The last time he'd been here, it had been their wedding day.

"Well. The new baby is due soon."

"Good. That's…good." Jacob was only a couple years older than Mervin, and they'd all played together countless times when they were boys. But now Isaac had no idea what to say.

After a few moments of silence, Jacob said, "Mervin won't be back for a while."

"Right. I'll go." Isaac took a step back.

"I drive Mary home from the singings now," Jacob blurted. "It

will be the third time on Sunday."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Jacob's eyes flashed. "I'll be a good husband to her. I think she was just starting to warm up to the idea, and now…" His cheeks flushed. "Did you change your mind?"

"No. No! Jacob, I don't want Mary." He felt stupidly guilty as the words left his mouth. "It's not that she isn't a good woman. She is. Any man would be lucky to take her as a wife." *Any man but me.* "I'm not trying to get her back. I never had her in the first place. I swear."

Jacob eyed him warily. "You mean that?"

"Yes. I won't try to get between you."

With a sigh, Jacob nodded. "Okay. Are you back for good? Or just for Nathan?"

"Just for Nathan."

"I never would have thought you'd go over the fence." A smile ghosted over his lips. "You never liked to break the rules. It was Mervin who got you in trouble. Or me."

Isaac smiled back. "I never would have thought it either."

"You can wait for Mervin if you want. I'm sure the girls have cake and coffee."

"I don't want to be a bother." And he shuddered at the thought of making more awkward small talk with the various Miller family members. "Actually, I think I'll go to the tree house. If that's all right?"

Jacob nodded. "When Mervin gets back, I'll tell him."

"Thank you. It's good to see you, Jacob." He extended his hand again. "And I really am happy for you and Mary. I hope it works out."

Jacob squeezed his palm, not unkindly this time. "It will. She's the girl for me." He tipped his hat as he returned to the barn.

The path to the tree house was over a small hill and into the trees that surrounded the Millers' farm. His boots sank into the damp earth in places, and he skipped over the sinkholes of sodden and dead leaves amid the tree roots. So many times he and Mervin had raced through the forest, and he smiled softly to himself as he thought of Mervin's freckles showing up darker on his red cheeks.

The tree house stood sentinel near the edge of the woods, a fallow pasture beyond that was home to the railroad tracks that skirted Zebulon. He tested his weight on the bottom rung of the old ladder, and it held him as he clambered up. "Made to last," he murmured.

It had been the first real thing Isaac had built. He and Mervin hadn't added a roof, preferring the open air in the treetop. New buds sprouted on the thick branches overhead, and soon there would be a roof of rustling leaves. He tested the floorboards, finding a few places that would need fixing. It could do with a fresh coat of varnish as

well. They'd left the front open, and he ran his fingers over the three short walls that enclosed the loft. On the back were the words he'd carved so many years ago.

Property of Mervin Miller and Isaac Byler—NO TRESPASSING ALLOWED

Isaac took out his pocketknife now and retraced the fading letters, placing his hat on the floor so he could lean in close. Fixing up the sign was silly thing to do, but it relaxed him to kneel down and carve the old wood. He really had missed carpentry the past few months. It was so easy to get swept up in new things in the city—school, and friends, and every kind of food he'd never known existed. He'd lost sight of the simple things. The give of wood as he put his blade to it, and the soothing peace it brought. When he and David went home, Isaac was going to make sure he worked with David at least twice a week.

He sat back on his heels, looking at the freshly carved message. Isaac reached into his pocket for his phone before he remembered he didn't have it. He would have loved to take a picture, but supposed his memory would have to do. He slipped the knife back into his pocket.

"Isaac?"

With the damp spring ground, he hadn't heard Mervin's approach. Isaac hurried to his feet, brushing off his knees. He peered over the ladder to find Mervin at the bottom looking up beneath the brim of his hat, his head tipped back. Isaac waved awkwardly.

Mervin's voice was flat. "You're really here."

"Um…yeah. Do you want me to go?" Isaac held his breath.

For a terrible moment, Mervin said nothing. Then he shook his head and started climbing, and Isaac moved back to let him up. When he reached the top, they stared at each other.

"Why did you come?"

"My brother—"

"I mean why did you come to see me?" Mervin's hands were stuffed in his pockets, and his shoulders hunched.

Because you were my best friend my whole life. "I thought we could…I dunno. Catch up," he finished lamely. His gaze returned to the carved sign. "Remember when we built this?"

"Uh-huh."

Isaac ran his hand over a wall. "We were out here every spare minute that summer. Remember that one time I practically missed dinner because we were finishing the floor? I was so afraid they'd say I had to stay home even after all my chores were done. But they didn't. Father even bought us the extra wood we needed after we used up all the scraps we'd found."

"It was nice of him," Mervin said stiffly.

Isaac sighed. He and Mervin had once been able to spend hours together without hardly saying a word. Now the seconds ticked by, and every breath felt too loud. He knew it would be best to leave, but he felt in his gut that he'd be losing an opportunity that would never come again.

Instead, he sat down on the open side of the tree house, dangling his legs over the side. He stared at the slash of metal tracks in the distance. "You never minded waiting for the train."

Behind him, the boards creaked. Mervin asked, "What?"

"Even after the other boys got bored, you never minded waiting with me for the chance to see a train. Sometimes it didn't even come, but you didn't get mad at wasting our time." There was another creak, and Isaac held his breath as Mervin settled down beside him.

Mervin kicked at the air with one foot. "That's because you didn't mind listening to me talk. Everyone else said I rambled on too much. Not you though."

"You were always a good talker. Why would I mind?" Isaac picked up a damp leaf and rolled it between his fingers. His mouth was too dry. "You could talk now."

"About what?"

"Everything. Are you still driving Sadie home from the singings?"

"Yep. Sadie and I are going steady. This fall we'll publish and get married after harvest."

"Really? That's awesome!" Isaac grinned.

Mervin grinned back, and for a wonderful moment, nothing had changed. "She's a great girl. She's so pretty, and she lets me kiss her sometimes. And she doesn't mind when I talk too much."

"Sounds like she's the girl for you."

Mervin's tone went wistful. "We might build a place next to my parents and John. Our kids can all play together. Maybe I'll fix up this tree house for them. John's little ones are almost old enough. It would be nice to have kids playing here again."

"It would." Isaac's smile faltered, and his eyes burned. He focused on the distant tracks, trying to get ahold of himself. *Will David and I ever have kids?* In that moment, thinking of the distant summer days and the days still to come, he wanted children more than he'd ever thought possible.

Isaac knew even if he and David could have kids they weren't ready for them yet, but there was a hard pressure in his chest. He could see Mervin's future so clearly. It was so very solid that he could practically hear the shrieks of laughter as the Miller children played together here on their land—their corner of the world.

Growing up he'd just assumed that of course he'd have children one day. It was the way of things. But now… He knew some gay

people had kids. He'd watched a program on TV about a…he tried to remember the word. *Surrogate.* And some people adopted. But it all seemed so complicated and far in the future.

Mervin tossed a twig over the side as if he were skipping stones in a pond. "We had some fun times out here, didn't we?"

"We did." He nodded to the pasture and tracks in the distance. "Still a nice view. I used to dream of taking one of those trains to the ocean."

Mervin shook his head. "I never thought you'd really do it, though."

"Me either." Isaac smiled. "I've been in the ocean now."

"Yeah?" Mervin glanced over, a tentative smile on his lips. "How was it?"

"Freezing." Isaac laughed, and then shivered as he remembered David's terror, and how long it had taken to get warm again. "This summer I want to go down the coast to where the water's warmer."

"This summer, huh? So you're leaving again?"

"You know I have to. You know I can't stay."

"But it still…I still want you to."

"Mervin…" His throat tightened.

Tossing another stick, Mervin asked, "Do you watch movies and all that stuff?"

"Uh-huh." Isaac smiled, grateful for the change of subject. "There are huge movie theaters where the sound is so loud, and the screen so tall. They even have chairs that move. So when something blows up, you shake."

Mervin looked over, his pale eyebrows disappearing beneath the brim of his hat. "Really?"

"It's pretty cool."

"I bet. But I got rid of the Touch Leroy sent me. It was fun for a little while, but I realized I don't need movies or music. It held something like a thousand songs, and I thought, Who needs a thousand songs? How would you ever choose? I'd waste half the day with all those extra things if I were English."

"There are a lot more choices, it's true."

"This way, I know what's what." Mervin shrugged. "I know exactly who I am and what I'll do." He was silent for a moment. "Don't you want a family one day? Kids?"

"I pray I will."

Mervin took off his hat and ran a hand through his red-blonde hair. It was longer now, going over his ears. "Do you really still pray?"

"Yes. Probably not as much as I should. But yes."

"That's good to hear. Maybe it's not too late."

"I think I can still believe in God without being Amish."

Mervin sighed. “But you know it isn’t the right way.”

“How do I know that?” Before Mervin could speak, Isaac answered for him. “Because the Ordnung says so. Because the bishop and preachers and our parents say so. But don’t you wonder, Mervin?”

His forehead creased. “Wonder what?”

“Wonder if this is truly what God wants? Us living separate from the rest of the world? Hiding away and pretending it’s still a hundred and fifty years ago? Why is that a better way? It separates us from other people. From people who love us, like Aaron. Is that what God wants? For us to shun people we love because they want a different life? How is that right?”

“I don’t know. It just is. We have to have faith, Isaac. All that freedom in the world, what good is it? They have wars and do terrible things. I don’t want any part of that. I want to have a family and have peace. We have to believe, and put our trust in the Lord, and our community. And in the end we’ll be rewarded for living plain, and not giving in to temptation.”

“But all the rules—they want to control you.”

Mervin shrugged. “Yeah but the rules make things easier. There are so many things I don’t have to worry about. Last week I went to the buggy maker down in Polk County, and it was easy. I gave him the specifications from the Ordnung, and that was that. I didn’t have to give it another thought.”

“But that’s all stuff that doesn’t really matter. Why is it important how tall your buggy is? Why would it be sinful to use the traffic reflectors so there are fewer accidents? They’re meant to protect people. How is that prideful? David’s mother and sister could have died. They almost did. Why is it wrong to have lights on buggies?”

“It just is.” Mervin huffed. “Why do you care now what we do anyway? You’re not staying.”

“Why wouldn’t I care? Isn’t it selfish if I don’t? Aren’t you selfish if you don’t care about other people in the world? There are millions of people out there. Billions, even. Shouldn’t you want to help them? Don’t they matter too? How does it serve God to stay isolated? What about the rest of the world? There are good people there. I know there are.”

“They choose to live that way, Isaac. All that noise and pride. It distracts from the simple joys of life. Here, our minds are clear. Focused. We can serve the Lord so much better.”

“Then why don’t you try and convince them? If everyone else is going to hell, shouldn’t you try to save them?”

Mervin’s jaw set. “Only God can do that. Isn’t it arrogant for you to think otherwise?”

“But if this is the right way, why does someone have to be born to

it? It's just luck where we end up being born. But the Amish don't take in outsiders. Hardly ever. So why isn't everyone born Amish if it's the way God wants us to be?"

"Listen to you with all these ideas in your head now. This is why we should stay away from the English. They make you question. It's not right."

"What's wrong with questioning?"

"We have to have *faith*!" Mervin's pale skin flushed. "I have faith that I'm living the way I should. The way God wants. That's what matters."

"What about me? Don't I matter to you?"

Mervin swallowed thickly and picked up another twig. This one he closed in his fist. "Of course."

"We've been best friends since we could talk. We were practically twins. After all these years, doesn't it hurt you that we can't see each other anymore?"

Mervin kept his head down, and he trembled.

"Because it hurts me." Isaac's eyes burned. "It hurts me so much that I won't get to talk to you about Sadie and your kids, or see them playing in our tree house. And why? For what? Because I'm a bad person? A sinner? How is it right to lose so much just because I'm different?" Tears wet his cheeks. "I didn't want to be different, Mervin. Is it right that I lose my family and my best friend because of it?"

Head still down, Mervin took a shaky breath, but didn't say anything.

"Aaron didn't want to be different either. He worked hard at changing. He joined the church and tried to be what they wanted him to be, but it broke him. It would have broken me too. And David. Living here made me ashamed of who I am. Of who I love. How can love be wrong?"

"Are you and he really still…" Mervin muttered.

Isaac didn't hesitate. "Yes.

When Mervin lifted his head, his eyes glistened, and he gripped Isaac's arm, suddenly impassioned. "Don't you think if you prayed hard enough, it would go away? If you married the right girl? Maybe Mary just wasn't the one. Katie Lapp's almost seventeen, and she's so pretty. You'd like her, I know you would. It's not too late. It's never too late. If you'd just *try*."

"I tried my whole life, Mervin," Isaac replied quietly. "I tried so hard. But I was always different. I just didn't know why until I met David. And before you say it, no. He didn't do this to me. He didn't change me, or twist me up. I'm the same as I always was. All he's done is love me."

Mervin's shoulders sagged, and he released Isaac's arm. "That's the thing I can't understand." Mervin stared ahead.

"What do you mean?"

"You're still you," he whispered. "I know you."

Isaac sucked in a breath, waiting for him to say more.

"You know it's a sin, but I hear you talk about love, and I know you mean it. You really do don't you? Love him?"

"With all my heart."

"I just can't see how. I'm trying, Isaac, but it's like you're telling me the sky is green. Even if you believe it, I still only see blue."

"Thank you for trying. It means a lot to me." They sat in silence for a few heartbeats before he got the courage to ask, "Why didn't you tell on us?"

Mervin didn't drop his gaze, and after a moment he simply said, "You're still my best friend."

Isaac swallowed roughly. "Thank you." He wanted to reach out, but would Mervin push him away if he touched him? "You know you're mine too."

Mervin nodded with a jerk of his head and toyed with the brim of his hat. After a few moments of silence he asked, "How is he? Nathan."

Isaac fought down a wave of nausea. "Not good." He spoke the words he couldn't say to his parents. "I think he might die. It doesn't seem possible. My little brother. He's just starting to grow up. Getting pimples and finishing school soon. He's barely lived. It's not fair."

"I know. I pray for him every day."

"Thank you."

After a few beats of silence, Mervin pushed himself to his feet. "I should get back." He brushed off the seat of his pants, swiping his sleeve over his eyes and slapping on his hat. "Lots of work to do, and dinner's soon."

"Right. Of course. I understand." Mervin was already starting down the ladder, and Isaac felt frozen sitting there. There was so much more he felt like he should say, but maybe they'd said enough.

Hands tight on the worn wooden rungs, Mervin stopped and glanced up beneath his hat brim. "You know, I still collect the mail every day." Then he disappeared from sight down the ladder.

Hope bloomed in Isaac, and he wanted to say that he'd write, but Mervin was already gone. He choked down a sob as he listened to Mervin's footsteps fade away through the sodden brush. He remembered the last time he'd been in this tree house, sneaking away and watching the train while David made him come and feel so good. The two of them in their own secret world. Now they didn't have to hide. Not out in the world, anyway. Not in the place where they'd

make a home together.

Picking up a dead branch, Isaac gazed at the distant tracks. He knew he should get back, but he needed a little time alone—and maybe a train would pass by soon. He swung his legs a little in the air. With sure strokes, he put his knife to the oak and waited for the whistle.

Chapter Six

David knocked softly at Eli Helmuth's house. He flattened his hair, still feeling naked without his hat. There were a flurry of footsteps inside, and Sarah yanked open the door.

"David!" She straightened her black cap over her dark hair, and shouted to their mother in German that David had returned. He winced at her choice of words, but plastered on a smile when Mother appeared, leaning on her cane. She scrutinized him, and he shifted from foot to foot.

"I just thought I'd see if you needed any help around the place. I know Eli must have a lot to do on his own."

"The boys next door come by after school."

"Oh." David's heart sank. Was he really not welcome now?

Mother clucked her tongue. "Well, if you're going to be here, you should look proper."

As relief rushed through him, David nodded. "Do you still have my things?"

Hurt flickered over her face. "Of course. Your trunk's in Anna's room. Change into fresh clothes and get your hat." She turned and shuffled back to the kitchen.

"I'll show you!" Sarah waited while David took off his old boots, and then led him upstairs. "I'll be eight soon."

He smiled at the random thought. "I remember. A big girl now, hmm?"

"Yep. I can carry a whole bucket of water from the well myself."

"Can you? You are a big girl." David thought of eight-year-old English girls, with their dolls and videogames and cartoons on TV. Sarah seemed so much more innocent.

It was almost eerie how similar Eli's house was to the one they'd lived in. Like he was right back at home, but not quite. He followed Sarah into one of the bedrooms. Even though it was Anna's, it looked the same as any Amish girl's room: a quilt on the bed, and simple wooden furniture. No decorations on the walls, or knickknacks cluttering the surfaces. David smiled to himself and wondered where she hid all her forbidden magazines and books. His old trunk was in the corner, and he ran his hand over the familiar grooves in the battered wood as he knelt.

Inside, his hats sat on top of neatly folded clothing. His black felt hat was sturdy as ever, and he glanced at Sarah sitting on the bed and watching him avidly. "Do you think it'll fit over my horns?" He winked.

She blushed and giggled. “I’m glad you didn’t grow horns out in the world.”

“Me too. I think it would be very uncomfortable for sleeping. Probably go through a lot of pillows with horns on my head.”

“Are you…” She trailed off.

“What?” David reached out to tickle her dangling feet. “You can ask me anything. Don’t be shy now.”

Sarah bit her lip. “Are you really the same? You seem like it.”

Am I the same? It seemed like a lifetime ago that he’d lived in Zebulon. “I am. But I’m different too. I’ve experienced a lot of new things. But I’m still your brother.”

“You don’t seem like the English boys who shout things from their pickup trucks when we’re walking home from school.”

He frowned. “When did that start?”

She shrugged. “A while ago. They don’t do anything. They just say things we don’t really understand.” Sarah dropped her voice. “But they don’t sound like very nice things.”

David clenched his jaw. The thought of anyone harassing his baby sisters made his blood run hot. “Have you told Mother?”

“Uh-huh. She said to ignore them, and they’ll go away.”

Of course that was their response. He huffed out a breath. Turning the other cheek was well and good, but he still wanted to find these boys and…*and what? Punch their faces?* He wasn’t sure. Was he becoming violent? Maybe he was. All he knew was that if he caught someone yelling nasty things to his sisters, he wouldn’t be able to simply ignore it.

“I’m sorry. Did I make you mad?” Sarah watched him with big eyes.

“No, no. Not you.” David came and sat beside her on the bed. “I just don’t want anyone bothering you. Next time tell Eli and see what he says, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do you like Eli?”

She nodded. “He’s nice. He lets me pack his pipe for him.”

David smiled. “I used to do that for Father sometimes. A long time ago.” Memories flickered through his mind, returning as always to that day in the fields. *Father collapsing, and David running as fast as he could, but not fast enough. Riding Kaffi through the trees to June’s, and the sirens as the ambulance came too late.*

“I don’t remember Father,” Sarah whispered. “Is that bad?”

David put his arm around her tiny shoulders. “No. That’s not bad.” He wanted to keep her close and safe, even though he knew he couldn’t. He’d leave again soon, and when would he ever see Sarah and his sisters again?

“When I was littler, I thought you were my father. Mary explained one day, but you still did the things fathers do. I remember when I twisted my ankle running after a squirrel. And I was so far away from the barn, but I called for you as loud as I could, and you came. I knew you would.” She leaned her head against David’s shoulder.

His chest burned, and he choked down the guilt. “I always will. I know I’ll be too far away to hear you shout, but if you ever need anything, you can call me. I’ll give my telephone number, and you can hide it away. And if you need me, find a way. You can always go to June’s. You remember her?”

“Uh-huh. But Mother says she’s a bad lady.”

“I know. But she’s not. She’s my friend. And she’d be your friend too. I know this all…you’re too young, and I shouldn’t be saying this.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “But I want you to know I’ll always come for you. No matter how far away I am. Okay?”

She choked on tears. “But why do you have to be far away? Why can’t you stay here?”

“I just can’t. Isaac and I can’t stay. We have to live somewhere else.”

“But *why*? If you and Isaac want to live somewhere else together, why can’t you do it here?”

He knew she didn’t mean living together as lovers—that was a concept far beyond her grasp. “I wish I could.” But did he, or was that a lie? As Sarah sniffled against his shoulder, thoughts tumbled through his mind.

Would I really come back if I could?

He tried to imagine a Zebulon where he and Isaac could live together in their own house. Sleep in each other’s arms in their own bed under a quilt one of their mothers had made for them. They’d take turns cooking eggs and porridge for breakfast, and he’d master Mary’s sugar cookies and the shoofly pie Isaac loved. At sunrise they’d walk together down to the barn past the chicken coop and a pasture where Kaffi and another horse—maybe Silver—would graze and whinny.

In the barn they’d craft bed frames and dressers and cribs for new neighbor babies, and they’d talk about nothing in particular while they sawed and sanded, laughing sometimes and stealing kisses. At the end of the work day they’d shower together with David’s secret contraption, and they’d walk back to their house barefoot, the grass still warm even as the sun disappeared. Dinner wouldn’t be waiting, but they’d make do. Their families would visit, and every other Sunday they’d go to church with everyone they knew.

And maybe someday they’d build a crib of their own.

Sarah sobbed, and David rubbed her trembling back. She climbed onto his lap, burying her face in his chest. “It’s all right. It’ll be all right,” he murmured.

Of course he knew his fantasy was just that. They would have no Amish customers, and would be shunned and banned from church and every neighbor’s home. Their siblings would be forbidden from visiting, and their parents would only come to them to plead for repentance.

Yet even if he and Isaac could live openly in Zebulon, in his mind David was already making changes to his fantasy. He’d want to make pieces for English clients as well. He loved the freedom of creating different shapes and sizes, and not caring what the Ordnung decreed. And he’d have the website June had helped him make so he could make furniture for people far and wide. He loved the satisfaction of knowing his work had a place in hundreds of homes all over the country.

They’d need a toaster and a fridge, and a microwave would be nice too. Aaron could teach them to make spaghetti sauce, and they’d freeze batches of it for when they didn’t feel like cooking something fresh. And of course Aaron and Jen would have to visit often. They’d all watch a movie after dinner, and Jen would make sarcastic comments while Aaron rubbed her feet. Unlike in Zebulon, they’d always be welcome, just as they’d made David and Isaac a place in their home.

He rocked Sarah and imagined that life. A life that could really be. A life without endless rules and sermons. The stillness and easy calm as he worked, but near enough to the city that it would be easy to visit. Closing his eyes, he could imagine he was in a new barn with a horse grazing just outside, the sawdust dancing in the air as he cut into a fresh beam of wood. Isaac would come home from school or work and would pick up a hammer, giving him a smile and kiss for no reason.

David was struck by a thought of Eve and the apple, and how once bitten, there was no going back. There was only the future, and a whole world of God’s creation to explore with Isaac. He swallowed a swell of emotion. “I can’t ever live here again, but wherever I go, you and your sisters will always have a place there.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” Sarah mumbled, her tears damp on his shirt.

“I wish I could take you with me.” As soon as the words left his mouth, his stomach clenched. Was it fair to say such a thing? Was it right? Was he encouraging Sarah to want to leave her family?

“Then why don’t you?”

“Oh, my Sarah.” He wished he could explain how much he

wanted to take her and the girls away and give them a world with more freedom. But they weren't his children to take. David tried to smile instead and remember some of the beautiful things in Sarah's life. "Think of how much you'd miss Mother and our sisters. All your friends from school. How you'd miss the frolics and weddings, and swimming in the pond come summer. Running through the damp grass and trying to catch fireflies. Sitting by the stove in winter and roasting chestnuts while Mary reads out loud."

"Then take us with you, and we can do those things somewhere else. Why can't we all be together again?"

David swallowed hard. "Because you're Amish, and I'm not anymore."

She lifted her tearstained face. "But *why*? Don't you like it here with us?"

"It's not because of you or your sisters, or Mother. I swear." He brushed at her damp cheeks. She was so small and vulnerable in his arms, and he ached for her. "I hope one day you'll be able to understand why. But I'll always be your brother, no matter how far away I am. This is a good place for some people. It just can't be for me."

But he and Isaac could have something like it in the world. A simple, good life. As he rocked his sister, he murmured an old lullaby, the German a comfort to him as well. "*Schlof, bubeli, schlof*…"

"Sarah!" Elizabeth's voice carried upstairs. "Come peel the potatoes."

David set her on her feet and wiped her cheeks again. "All right now. Go be a good girl." He kissed her forehead. It wasn't like them to talk openly of their feelings, but he didn't hesitate. "Remember I love you. I'll always be there for you."

"I'll never forget," she whispered, and ran from the room.

#

When David could collect himself enough, he went downstairs. He'd changed into fresh clothes, and carried his felt hat. He'd never felt more like an imposter. As he reached the foot of the stairs, he realized guests had just arrived. He'd been so lost in his own world that he hadn't heard the buggy or knock, and now he stood frozen in the face of Deacon Stoltzfus and his wife, who regarded him with a mix of curiosity and distaste.

She was a stout woman with worn lines around her eyes, and he couldn't imagine her ever being young, or carefree. She'd once been a child, of course, but David couldn't imagine her or the deacon without the heaviness that hung over them.

"Hello, Deacon. Mrs. Stoltzfus. How are you?" It was the most he'd said to the woman perhaps ever. After Joshua had gotten her

daughter, Martha, killed with drugs and recklessness, the Stoltzfuses had of course immediately offered their forgiveness, but David had never been sure they meant it. The family of Rachel, the other girl that had drowned that terrible night, had stayed in Red Hills, and David had been relieved not to have to face them and see their grief.

She nodded, but didn't smile. "Well, thank you." She lifted a basket and addressed Mother. "Miriam, I made too many muffins."

"Come, come." Mother waved her into the kitchen, glaring at the girls to follow. Anna and Mary had appeared, and they gave David a little wave before following.

Now it was only Eli, David, and the Deacon, whose bushy eyebrows gave him a thunderous appearance as usual as he stared at David. Martha had been a pretty thing, and Joshua's voice echoed in David's mind.

"She can't stand her father. Can you imagine what he's like at home? I've never seen him laugh, not once. I think Martha might leave with me when the time is right."

He'd never know if she would have left, or if Joshua really would have either. Looking at the deacon now with his sausage fingers and slumped shoulders, David felt a pang of sadness, and hoped that Martha had loved her father more than she'd said.

"Why don't we sit?" Eli waved the deacon toward one of the rocking chairs.

Panic bubbled up in David. "I'll leave you to discuss your business." Before Eli could say a word, David rushed past them and out the front door, leaving his boots behind. It was still cold to be running around in bare feet with no jacket, but he hurried to the barn, not looking back, and breathing in and out the way Jen taught him.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been studiously sweeping out the stalls when footfalls echoed into the rafters. David's head was bent as he worked, and beyond the brim of his hat he could see the tips of a man's boots. *Please be Eli.* He forced himself to smile, and it was likely more of a grimace. He gripped the broom as he looked up. "Deacon."

"David Lantz." The deacon regarded him evenly. "I'm glad to see you returned. Back where you belong."

David blinked, certain he was hearing things. "I…thank you. But I…"

"We welcome back all who return and commit themselves to the Lord. Who repent for their sins. It is not too late for you."

He tried to think of something—anything—to say. But any kind of small talk felt wrong. It was the Amish way to get to the heart of the matter and not dance around it. "You'd really welcome me back?" David swept at a stray piece of hay. "I thought you'd be relieved I was gone."

The deacon's bushy brows drew together. "Relieved that one of our flock was lost?"

"Not if it was someone else, but with me…"

He still frowned. "What?"

"I just never thought you liked me much. I thought maybe…" David's heart thumped. "Do I look like him? Like Joshua?" The name hung in the musty air, and he wished he could call it back. It sounded like a silly question, but he honestly didn't know. His memories of Joshua were faded and shrouded in the shadows of loss. He could imagine the sharpness of his smile, but not the color of his eyes. Without any photographs, he wasn't sure if he'd grown to resemble him or not.

For the first time David could remember, the deacon appeared flustered, and his voice rose. "What? Why?"

"I thought perhaps that's why you didn't like me. Because I reminded you of him."

The deacon opened and closed his mouth before inhaling and exhaling slowly. He shook his head solemnly, speaking in his low tones once more. "You are not responsible for your brother's sins, which we forgave long ago."

It was the same kind of platitudes David had heard for years. This time, he pressed for more. "But have you?" The questions he'd wanted to ask for years tumbled off his tongue. "How? How can you forgive him after what he did?" He thought of his brother naked in the river, the girls barely dressed, all with drugs poisoning them. It had been a sordid end. "Your daughter—"

"We will speak no more of my daughter. It is the past. It has no bearing on you. On your choice to turn your back on God, and your community. There is only one way to salvation. Take it. Come home where you belong."

"I…"

"Think of your poor mother. Must she lose two sons? What a terrible burden that would be."

"I know. I wish it could be different. I wish—"

"Wishes are for children and fools. Not for men."

It was true enough. "It pains me to leave my family. But this is the path I choose."

"There is always another way. The way of the righteous. There is nothing that cannot be overcome when we stand together."

"But you're the ones who insist it has to be this way. That you must be separate. With no compromise. To live the life I want, I have to sacrifice my family. That's not the way it would be if it were up to me. You're good people, and you think you're doing what's right." His heart pounded. "But I'm good too, and I have to choose what's right

for me."

"It is never too late to repent," the deacon insisted, his jaw set. Then his face softened, and his gruff growl of a voice was little more than a whisper. "Let me help you. It's not too late."

All these years the deacon had done little but glower at him, and David thought he must be dreaming to see the tenderness in the man's eyes, to hear the pleading in his voice. He couldn't find a single word in response.

"It's not too late," Deacon Stoltzfus repeated, and then shuffled away, his boots echoing once more.

Chapter Seven

"This is delicious, Katie." Isaac took another bite of the chicken pot pie, the flaky crust buttery on his tongue.

Across the table, she beamed. "Thanks, Isaac."

Heavy silence settled over them again, chewing and the clinks of cutlery the only sounds. Nathan's empty place beside him felt cavernous. There was so much to say to each other, and part of him wanted to shake his parents so the words would come out. He'd rather they yelled at him. But this was their way—the Amish way. They might be pacifists, but silence was their weapon.

Joseph tentatively asked, "Do they have carpenters in the city?"

Isaac glanced at his parents' pinched expressions before answering. "Yep. David has his own business, and I help him sometimes."

"What do you do the rest of the time?" Joseph frowned. "What do people do when they don't have cows to milk or chores to do?"

"I've been going to school."

Joseph's frown deepened. "But you finished school a long time ago."

"I know." He glanced at his parents, who were like statues, their mouths pressed into thin lines. "But the English go to school until they're much older. High school doesn't end until they're eighteen, and then some of them go to college. I'm studying so I can get my GED. It's a high school diploma but you don't have to take years of classes."

"What do you do with that?" Katie asked.

"Anything I want." Isaac stuck a creamy pea with the tine of his fork.

Father grumbled something under his breath.

A flare of frustration lit up Isaac. "What did you say?" Ephraim shot him an incredulous glance, but Isaac plowed on. "Go on. Tell me."

"The English don't know what's important. Hard work and family. Community. Obeying the Lord. They waste time with all these other vain, useless things." Father scooped up a piece of pie and shoved it in his mouth like an exclamation point.

"It's not a waste of time. I'm learning. It may not be important to you, but it is to me. I've made friends there too."

"What are their names?" Katie asked.

"Chris, Derek, and Lola."

Father grumbled. "Lola? What kind of name is that?"

"It's…I don't know. But it suits her."

Katie's eyes lit up. "Is she your girlfriend? Do you drive her home?" She frowned. "Although I guess you don't have a buggy."

"Is she really your girlfriend?" Ephraim asked eagerly.

Joseph scrunched up his face. "Eww."

Isaac almost laughed, thinking to himself that his reaction to a girlfriend would be similar to little Joseph's. But his parents were rigid, staring at him, clutching their knives and forks. "No. Lola's just a friend. I don't have a girlfriend." He swallowed a bite of pie so he wouldn't have to say anything else.

Joseph asked, "Do you have a nice teacher like Miss Schrock?"

"Uh-huh. I have a few teachers, and they're all really nice. They've been to college and they know a lot."

"Do they know about planting soybeans? Mr. Yoder has a new patch of land. Maybe you could help him," Joseph suggested.

Isaac laughed uneasily. His parents were still on edge, but had gone back to eating. "No. They don't know anything about farming."

"So what do they know?" Katie tilted her head. "Do they know about science?"

"Uh-huh. And geography, and history, and art, and music, and math, and English."

"What do you do when you know those things?" Joseph scraped his fork on the bottom of his bowl.

"Nothing useful," Father answered. "This is why we farm. This is all we need to know to please God."

"There are lots of things to do in the world." Isaac couldn't help himself. "Lots of ways to please God. I might go to college someday."

"What would you study?" Katie asked.

"Enough of this." Father swiped his mouth with a napkin. "We live off the land. No need to fill our minds with all that worldly nonsense."

"Just because it's English doesn't mean it's nonsense." Isaac kept his tone even. "I've learned a lot. There are so many things that have happened that we never even hear about."

"What kinds of things, hmm?" Father asked. "War? Famine? More war?"

"Well, some of it. Yes, there have been a lot of wars."

"All that violence and killing. And for what?" Father shook his head wearily. "Such a waste."

"Yes. But there are good things too." His mind whirled. "Like how scientists have cured diseases. Diabetes used to kill all kinds of people, but a man discovered insulin, and now people live. There are wonderful inventions that help people. That make their lives better."

Father took another bite of chicken, grunting. Mother kept her

gaze on her plate. “We trust in the Lord to keep us healthy.”

“But what about Nathan?” Ephraim blurted. “He’s not healthy.”

“And he’s getting English medicine,” Isaac added. “Why is that okay?”

Father glared now, and his fist thumped the table, rattling the dishes. “Because the Ordnung permits it in times of grave injury or illness.”

And that was that.

After they finished dinner in silence, Isaac hurried to the outhouse, eager for a few minutes alone. He wished he had his phone to text David, but at least he’d see him soon. The moon was rising, and it looked like the night would be clear.

As he walked back to the house, Isaac found his mother by the laundry line. “Can I help?”

She glanced at him sharply. “This is women’s work.”

So he stood there uselessly, watching her pick the clothespins with nimble fingers. There was so much he wanted to say, and no words to use. “I…Mother…”

After a moment of silence, she started talking, her gaze on the clothesline. “I was young once too, Isaac. I remember what it was like to want to see the world. To have questions.”

He blinked. “What did you question?” He’d never thought of her as a girl. He realized he’d never thought about her as anything but a mother.

“Oh, the same things the youngies do now.” She shrugged.

“Tell me. Please?”

She folded a little dark dress of Katie’s. “Why the rules are as they are. Why the English can live the way they do and we can’t.”

“Did you have *rumspringa*?”

“Yes.” Mother reached for another dress, one of her own this time. “But it wasn’t wild the way it’s become in some places.”

“What did you do?”

“Isaac, it was all so long ago. What does it matter now?” She folded briskly, keeping her gaze on her basket.

“Did you drive in cars? Go to parties?” No way he was going to let her drop this now.

“Sure. Those kinds of things.” She rolled two black socks into a neat ball. Then another pair, and another. Finally she said, “I met an English boy. He had a pickup truck. It was shiny and green. So vain, of course.”

“You dated an English boy?” Isaac could hardly believe his ears.

“For a summer. We drove fast with the windows down, and drank beer by a lake.”

“*You* drank beer?”

Her lips twisted in a brief smile. “A few times.”

“What was his name?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head, the strings of her white cap swaying. “It was decades ago.”

“You remember.” He waited.

She waved her hand dismissively and reached for a shirt from the line. “I think it was Steve or something like that.”

Issac tried to imagine Mother and a boy named Steve speeding in a truck on a warm summer night, her pale hair loose in the wind. “And then what?”

“And then nothing.” She rolled another pair of socks tightly. “Rumspringa doesn’t last. The time came to grow up. To start my life the way it should be. I joined the church and your father asked to drive me home after the singing one Sunday. Here we are.”

“You didn’t miss it?”

“Of course not.”

“Come on. I know that’s not true. I’ve been in the world, remember?”

Her ghost of a smile made him ache. “All right. There were a few things. Music especially. There was a band called The Eagles. Steve had a little plastic tape in his truck. They sang a song about California. I’d make him rewind it over and over, and he never complained.” She took a shuddering breath. “I thought of it when we read your letter. My boys living all the way out there. So far from home. From God.” She turned to him, her eyes beseeching. “Don’t you see? You’ve had your rumspringa. It’s time to be a man.”

“I *am* a man. That’s why I’m choosing what’s right for me. Just like you did when you joined the church and got married. It was worth it to you to give up those worldly things.”

“Of course. Music and a fancy truck don’t mean anything in the end. Family, community, and the Lord are what matters.”

“But for me and Aaron, the world is about so much more than fancy things. It’s about opportunity. Freedom. It’s about being our true selves. And that means everything.”

She turned back to her basket, her small shoulders hunched. “When your brother left, we prayed and prayed. We met with the bishop and the preachers, trying to understand why it had happened.” Mother kept her eyes on the laundry line as she picked off a white apron and folded it into the basket.

“And what did they say?” he asked quietly.

Mother’s lips tightened. “That we had to stay strong. Shun him when the time came, because if we allowed contact, what reason would he have to return? We couldn’t make it easy for him to be out in the world. But it didn’t matter. He never came back. Never tried to

visit." She unclipped one of Father's dark shirts, flapping in the cool evening breeze. "Never gave us another thought," she added quietly.

"Of course he did! How can you say that?" She stared at him with wide eyes, but Isaac barreled on. "He's dying for you to acknowledge him. To say he's still your son. Don't you miss your own mother? I remember when I was little, and she was still alive, and how the two of you would quilt for hours, talking and talking. I've never seen you talk with anyone the way you did with her. Can you imagine if she'd shut you out? If she'd cut you out of her life?"

Mother's jaw worked, but when she opened her mouth, no words came out.

"He would do anything to have you look at him like a mother again. With love."

She yanked at another shirt, the clothespins going flying. "Not anything."

"What?"

"It isn't true. If he would do anything, then he'd come back to us! He would take his vows in the church, and all would be forgiven. We'd be whole again."

Isaac didn't back down, even though he could see the quiver in his mother's lip. "Aaron can't be Amish. But he still loves you. He's still your son."

"He made his choice. If he truly loved us, he would stay. He would obey. This is the way it should be. You know this, Isaac."

"But it can't be this way for all of us. It doesn't mean we're bad. Aaron isn't bad. He never was, and he isn't now. He's fair, and generous, and good, and I hate seeing him in so much pain. Doesn't it tear you up inside to shun him?"

"Yes!" Her scream echoed in the night, and she clutched the shirt in her weathered hands. When she spoke, it was barely a whisper. "More than you could ever know. He was my first little boy. I had such dreams for the man he'd become. I imagined him working with your father and eventually taking over, and he'd build us a *dawdy haus* attached to his house when the time came." Her face creased. "He used to tell me he'd still want me to cook his dinner because no matter who he married she'd never make butter noodles better than mine."

Isaac's throat was painfully tight. "Then why?"

"Because the Ordnung—"

"Stop! *Please.* I know what the Ordnung says. I know what Bishop Yoder and the preachers say. I want to hear what *you* say. Because it hurts Aaron so much to be separated from you. Can't you see that? Can't you see he's in pain? He's the same boy you raised."

"What can I say? Tell me, Isaac!" Her voice rose. "If I could

convince you both to stay, I would try with every breath in my body. I would scream and shout until my voice was gone." She still gripped the shirt as if she might tear it in two. "But you're both deaf to my pleas. To my pain. How can you turn your backs on all we raised you to believe? On *us*? I know it hurts him, and you. But we hurt too." She pressed her hand to her chest as she struggled for a breath. "The sharp edges eventually dull, but it's heavy and it never goes away."

"But why does it have to be this way? What's the good in it? Don't the rules just hurt us all in the end?"

"I must have faith. I have to trust in the Ordnung. In our ways. If I don't, what was this all for?"

"You tell me! How can it be God's will to have families torn apart? To shun people you love? How can it be right? You don't have to do it. Not if you don't want to."

She stared incredulously. "But we *must,* Isaac. If we don't follow the edicts of the church, we'll be next on the *Bann*. What would become of Katie and the boys? We must have faith in our community, even when we disagree. When we question." Her voice cracked. "When it breaks our hearts." She took a long breath and regained control. "This is our way. It won't change. Not a hundred years ago, and not now. It's the foundation of our lives. It's everything."

As much as it tore into him, Isaac understood. Faith and obedience were the backbone of the Amish. With those two things all could be forgiven, but they were impossible for him now. He wanted to find his faith again, but it would never be in Zebulon.

She clutched his arm, her blunt nails digging into his flesh. "But we wouldn't need to shun if you'd live the way God wants. What could be better out there? What could make you choose to live in sin? Help me understand, Isaac. Help me."

The words gathered on his tongue, to try and explain to her why he could never be Amish again. To try and explain how much he and David loved each other, and that it wasn't a sin at all. She stared at him so heartbroken, with tears shining in her eyes, and blood rushed in his ears. "Mom…I…I'm…"

"We tried so hard." She still gripped his arm. "We moved here to Zebulon to raise you all better. To cast aside even more worldly things than we had in Red Hills. I had to leave behind my first born. To not have Abigail and Hannah and my grandchilden here is a hole in my heart every day. But Abigail and Hannah were married and settled. We couldn't fail with the rest of you. You and Katie and your brothers were still vulnerable. After we lost Aaron we knew we had to be more humble. More penitent. We prayed and prayed, and we thought we knew what we did wrong. How we could protect you all. Keep you safe."

“I know you did what you believe is right.” Isaac covered her hand with his own. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Then why did he go? Why did you follow? My boys, out there alone! *Why*? And now Nathan is wasting away.” A sob wracked her. “My Nathan is so weak I have to hold his spoon as if he were a baby. He’s in so much pain, and I can’t take it from him.” A wail ripped free from her. “I can’t make him better! Why isn’t it me in that hospital? Why is it is my boy? Why do my children suffer? Will I lose you all, one by one?” Her shoulders heaved and she bent almost in half.

Isaac threw his arms around her. For the first time, he held his mother—not as a child being comforted, but as a man. “I’m sorry.” She clung to him, bowing her head against his shoulder and sobbing silently. He held her tightly, wishing he could do something more. “Everything will be all right. It will.” One way or another, they’d all have to find their peace with it.

A twig snapped, and Mother jerked away, wiping her cheeks as she blinked at Katie several feet away. Isaac tried to smile for his sister as he fought down his own tears. “Everything’s fine. Don’t worry.”

“I was just coming to help with the laundry, and I heard—” Katie stared at Mother with wide eyes. “Are you sick?”

Mother turned back to the line and snapped off a sheet. “Let’s finish this up. We have to make the bread before bed.”

She and Katie silently folded, and Isaac lingered nearby uselessly, wishing there was more he could say. A little voice reminded him that there *was* more—there was the whole truth. Didn’t his mother deserve to know? To know what was in his heart—to know *him*?

Katie cast worried glances his way, and he tried again to smile. But Mother didn’t meet his gaze again, keeping her hands busy. Her stoic mask was back in place when they returned to the house, her tears dried as if they’d never been there at all. Yet she couldn’t erase the puffiness of her red eyes, and for the first time Isaac felt he’d really seen the churning tide below the surface.

Chapter Eight

After cutting over several fields and skirting farmhouses, Isaac was on David's old land, Silver sure and steady in the darkness. The half moon peeked in and out from behind clouds, just enough so Isaac could find his way. Isaac jumped, gripping Silver with his thighs as a dog barked near the former Lantz house, now owned by Joseph Yoder and his new wife. Silver whinnied, and Isaac leaned low over her back. "Shh. It's all right, girl. We'll stay far away from that fellow."

How wonderful it was to be with Silver again. He petted her and gave her words of praise, promising her all the sugar and apples she could eat. He rode without a saddle since his family only used horses for plows and buggies. It had been with David on Kaffi that he'd first ridden bareback. As he entered the woods on the outskirts of Zebulon, he flushed and rolled his hips, the memory of rutting with David for the first time flaring in his mind.

The day had been the warmest of spring yet according to Ephraim, and Isaac hadn't worn his hat. If he was caught out his improper attire would be the least of his concerns. He'd thought about wearing his English clothes, but it had been easier to just pull on the Amish ones and not dig around. Although he'd been exceptionally quiet, he had a feeling Ephraim had still known he was sneaking out.

It must have been nearly midnight when he reached what he thought was the right spot. Flickers of that night—now that he thought about it, it was their first *date*—pinged through his mind, along with the memory of David's low voice.

"What would you think if we didn't go fishing tonight?"

"Isaac, if you knew what I really wanted—"

"You should run far away from me, Isaac. I'll drag you down. Lead you to temptation."

Stroking Silver's head, Isaac smiled, remembering the shivers of excitement as he'd dressed English for the first time and they'd gone to the drive-in. Then their first kiss by June's fence, and coming together amid the leaves on the forest floor, David between his legs, driving against each other.

"Penny for your thoughts."

With a grin, Isaac slid from Silver's back and threw himself into David's arms. "You're here."

"Of course." David rubbed his cheek against Isaac's hair. "You slipped out okay?"

"Uh-huh. Quiet as a mouse." Isaac closed his eyes and breathed in David. Somehow he still smelled of sawdust beneath a sweet soap, but

it might have been Isaac's imagination. After being home perhaps he should have felt guilty for the way he wanted David, but he knew more than ever that it was right as he met David's sweet kisses. "I missed you," he murmured. "I know it's only been since this afternoon, but I did."

"Me too. Is everything going all right at home? With Nathan?"

"As right as they can be. How is Aaron doing tonight?"

"He's quiet. I only saw him for a little while before he went to bed."

"I talked to my mother about him. About me too." He sighed heavily. "I know she loves us. But she'll never go against the church. It's like…we're on a riverbank and none of us can swim, and she's on the other side. So close, but always too far."

"I understand." David brushed Isaac's cheek. "I wish it didn't have to be this way. They believe they're right, and we won't change their minds. It's right for them. We have to do what's right for us."

Silver neighed softly as she munched on the new grass struggling to grow. Quickly, Isaac tethered her to a tree, giving her lots of slack on the reins. He turned back to David, imagining he could see the blue of his beautiful eyes even in the shadows of the forest.

"There are things we need to talk about," David said. "Things I need to tell you."

Isaac nodded. "Yes." They did need to talk. But he itched to touch, to feel David inside him and know that they were okay. "Later."

He lunged for David's mouth, kissing him with the same desperation he had their first night in these trees. David moaned, his tongue meeting Isaac's as they grappled, hands squeezing and roaming. Isaac thrust his hips against David's, his cock already getting hard, rubbing against the fabric of his pants.

"Wait, wait," David mumbled, breaking the kiss. "I brought…" He motioned to a large bag on the ground that Isaac hadn't noticed. He dropped to his knees and unfurled two blankets. "Is it…do you want…"

Isaac was already yanking off his coat and clothes. Gooseflesh rippled over his bare skin in the night air, but his blood was hot enough. He stripped off everything but his black boots, tugging his pants free over them, the legs just wide enough. David had just removed his shirt when Isaac urged him back on the blanket, pulling the other one up over his own shoulders. Isaac settled over David's hips, groaning as he rubbed against the bulging fly of David's jeans.

"Oh, Isaac. I wish you could see how beautiful you are," David murmured, running his hands up and down Isaac's thighs.

Running his fingers over David's lips, Isaac whispered, "You too."

He bent over and kissed him. “I need you inside me. It’s been too long.”

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes.” David reached for the bag and fished out a little jar of petroleum jelly. He smiled crookedly. “I’ll buy June another pot.”

Laughter bubbled up from Isaac’s chest. He kissed David again, wanting to forget everything else in this moment. There was only the two of them in the whole wide world, here together, and it was all that mattered for now. Isaac dipped his fingers into the little jar and sat up on his knees. He reached behind himself boldly, finding his hole.

The blanket slipped off his shoulders, but Isaac didn’t care. He pushed his index finger into his ass, working it in inch by inch. He didn’t even feel the night air, a flush traveling over his body as he opened himself. His cock jutted out, and it was so *shameless*, the way he was putting on a show. Not even in the privacy of their bedroom, but on the forest floor for the world to see. He shuddered, his balls growing heavy. *Let them see me.* Such brave thoughts when he knew they were alone.

David moaned softly, his lips parted as he watched. He caressed Isaac’s nipples until they were hard nubs, his fingertips dancing down over Isaac’s belly and around the base of his cock. “I could watch you all night.”

Smiling, part of Isaac wanted to continue working himself to see how long David could watch before breaking. But Isaac was breaking already—he needed to feel David filling him again. With sloppy fingers he rose up and jerked open David’s jeans, tugging them down with the black boxer briefs. He got them far enough so he could pull out David’s thick, beautiful cock.

It throbbed in his hand, and Isaac slathered it with more jelly before positioning himself over it and sinking down. “Oh, yes.” His thighs flexed as he lowered himself slowly, David’s hands on his hips. The burn was familiar, but somehow felt all new at the same time. “You feel so good inside me, my David.”

“I want to come already.” He bit his lip. “Want to fill you up.” His fingers dug into Isaac’s hips.

“Yes,” Isaac groaned. “Fill me. But not yet.”

David laughed shakily. “No. Not just yet.”

Isaac smiled, and they laughed together as he sank the last inch. He could feel the open zipper of David’s jeans against his ass, cold and rough. He wriggled against it, enjoying the sensation. The little pieces of metal—so very forbidden in Zebulon—were like a reminder of the world that waited for them when they could leave once more. He was so full with David’s shaft, and when he squeezed around it, it

throbbed with David's pulse.

"You're so good," David muttered, arching up with his hips. "I want to disappear inside you. Only you." He took Isaac's face in his hands, pulling him low and meeting his gaze fiercely. "Only you. Always you."

Isaac shuddered, and he kissed David roughly. "You're mine."

"Yes." David thrust up. "Yours."

A breeze skipped through Isaac's hair and over his bare skin. Pushing with his toes in his boots, he tensed his thighs and started moving up and down on David's cock. David was like a poker inside him, burning orangey-red and sending tingles up his spine to the tips of his ears. "You feel like… I want it all." Isaac knew he wasn't making sense, yet he couldn't seem to find the right words.

But David seemed to understand, and he nodded as he stroked Isaac's thighs and hips. Their breathing was harsh, loud in the still of the forest, with only old leaves that had survived the winter skittering about, and Silver's contented munching nearby. Isaac leaned his palms on David's chest, feeling the pounding of his heart as he rode him harder, thinking of the power of a galloping horse as he fucked himself.

They were both grunting now, and Isaac tipped back his head and closed his eyes, letting his cries echo to the sky as he drove onward. The zipper grazed his skin each time he slammed down, and the little nip of pain somehow made the pleasure building in him burn all the brighter. He opened his mouth, making sounds he never had before—a mix of shouts and screams that should have embarrassed him.

But he felt free, as though he could float away if not for David's cock swelling inside him, his hands grounding him, his murmurs and gasps of encouragement loud in Isaac's ears as though he was wearing earbuds and David was speaking right into him. Isaac found the right angle to hit the little spot inside him, and dropped his head to meet David's avid gaze, everything tightening.

"That's it. That's it." David took Isaac's cock in hand and jerked it roughly. "Come for me, Eechel."

The wave crashed through him, and Isaac cried out as he painted David's chest. He shook, squeezing down on David as the pulses ripped out of him. David stroked him, urging every last drop from him. Isaac felt as though he'd been turned inside out and emptied completely, made fresh and new.

And then David was filling him, moaning as he jerked, his hands tight on Isaac's hips, and it felt so *good.* Hot and alive, and Isaac didn't want it to stop. "More," he muttered. "More."

"All of it," David groaned.

Even when it was dripping from him, Isaac squeezed, not wanting

to let David go. “You’re mine.” His voice was hoarse. “And I’m yours. Always. Your eechel. No one else gets this.”

“No one,” David agreed. He caressed Isaac’s chest. “Only us. You know that, right?”

Certainty consumed every inch of him. “Yes.” He tightened around David again. “Only us.”

When David whimpered, Isaac relented, flopping on David’s sticky chest and burying his face in his neck. Isaac couldn’t help but whimper himself when David’s softening cock slipped from him, but David seemed to understand, and slid two fingers inside, filling him again and plugging him up. Isaac smiled, amazed. It should be disgusting, but he loved it.

Silver whinnied, and they both laughed. She was pacing where Isaac had tied her, clearly agitated by Isaac’s screams. “It’s all right, girl,” he croaked. He’d been so wild, but David had clearly liked it. So had Isaac. “Everything’s all right.” She snorted, but settled soon enough.

David ran his other hand over Isaac’s hair. “I want to stay here all night.”

“We can. A few more hours, at least.” The breeze skimmed over them, and he shivered.

“Here. Yes, that’s it.” David gently removed his fingers from Isaac’s ass and guided him onto the blanket before pulling the other one over them tightly. He swiped at his chest with his T-shirt. At Isaac’s smirk, David chuckled. “Good thing I wore a hoodie too.”

Isaac turned on his left side and rested his cheek on David’s shoulder, and their legs tangled as they held each other close. He hadn’t shaved in a few days, and his stubble scraped on David’s skin. He’d have to shave in the morning and hoped he could still do it without a mirror. Isaac was naked but for his boots, and he slid his calf over David’s jeans as he licked sweat from the hollow of David’s throat. “What if I’d never come to work for you?”

David shivered and tightened his arm around Isaac’s shoulders. “I don’t know. I suppose we’d still be here in Zebulon. I never would have had the courage to leave without you.” He was silent for a moment. “I shouldn’t call leaving my mother and sisters courage.”

“It was. You did all you could for them. And they’re well, aren’t they? They didn’t starve.”

A ghost of a smile lifted David’s lips, and the warm relief flowed through him. “Eli said it was a blessing for him. That his life was empty.”

“See? Isaac ran his fingers through the scattered hair on David’s chest. “God has a plan.”

“Even for people like us?”

“It seems like it, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” He kissed the tip of Isaac’s nose.

Isaac flattened his palm over David’s heart. He could feel the slightest throb, and he rubbed gently. “Can you tell me how you’ve been feeling? The things that made you so scared?”

David’s breathing stuttered. “Are you sure?”

“Of course.” Even as David’s heart rate increased, Isaac kept his hand there, pressing lightly.

David licked his lips. “When we left Zebulon, I was so happy. I’d felt so trapped here, and finally I was free—and with you. But part of me was…I don’t know how to explain it. Part of me felt so terrible and guilty for leaving my family. I tried not to think about it. You know the jars the girls use for canning? I put it in one of those and closed the lid so tight. But then there was more. The world wasn’t what I thought it would be. It was frightening. I thought I knew what it would be like, but I didn’t have a clue.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “I was afraid you’d think I was stupid and weak. That I wasn’t who you thought I was. That you’d be disappointed I didn’t have all the answers.”

Isaac tightened his fingers on David’s chest. “Don’t you know me better than that?” He couldn’t keep the hurt from his voice.

David swallowed thickly. “I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry. I know you wouldn’t judge me. It’s just…”

“What?” Isaac asked gently.

“It’s hard sometimes not to think the worst of myself. I thought I was so worldly sneaking off to the drive-in and using an electric saw. The city has been so hard to get used to. Much harder than I expected. It’s so noisy and crowded. Sometimes I couldn’t bear it. But it was more than that. Living English is different in so many ways. It was like we’d moved to the moon. I didn’t understand the words people used, and there’s so much technology. I’d always thought of myself as…I don’t know. Adventurous, maybe. Then I saw how the English really live, and I felt like a little boy trying to keep up while everyone got so far ahead of me. Things that come so easily to them feel confusing and huge to me.”

“I felt like that too sometimes. My first few days at school, I had a million questions and I was afraid to even ask how the soap in the bathroom worked. But I found out that if you ask, most people will help. They *like* helping.”

“You’re right. I’m asking now. I should have all along.”

“Why didn’t you tell me how you felt? Why didn’t you let me help?”

“You were doing so well. Making friends and going to school. I didn’t want to worry you. Disappoint you.” He sighed, and his breath

brushed over Isaac's skin. "I was afraid you'd leave me behind."

Isaac pushed up on his elbow. "*What*? I…I…" He sputtered. "Why would you ever think that?"

"Everything was changing. You were changing."

Isaac exhaled and calmed himself. If he wanted David to talk, he had to listen. "Okay. That's true. But…leave you? Why?"

David was quiet for a few moments, and he reached up to brush back Isaac's hair. "I think part of it was that I didn't expect you to go to school. I thought we'd work together like we did here. You wouldn't be my apprentice anymore, and it would be our business. Together." He hastily added, "And I understand why you're going to school. I support you. I do."

"I know you do."

"So many things had changed, and suddenly you were going to school. You didn't even tell me it was a possibility, and…you'd already decided. It honestly hadn't even crossed my mind. There was no warning. It was a big decision, but you didn't even talk to me about it first."

Isaac's stomach churned. "You're right. I'm sorry. I should have told you. I shouldn't have just sprung it on you the way I did."

"Why did you?"

He flushed with remorse. "I think…I think I was afraid you wouldn't want me to go."

"Well, you weren't totally wrong. I was sad we wouldn't be making a business together. But I'm glad you're going to school. I want you to do everything you've dreamed of. I'd never want to stand in your way."

"I wouldn't want to stop you from doing what you want either."

David nodded. "I know. When we left home, sometimes talking to each other was harder than it should have been. But I think…I didn't realize it at the time, but when that happened, I started wondering what other things would change. What other choices you'd make without me. If you didn't want to be a carpenter with me anymore, maybe you wouldn't want me at all." His voice was barely a whisper. "It hurt."

"Oh, David." Isaac dropped back down, pressing into David's side and kissing his chest. "I'm sorry you felt that way. I'd never leave you behind. You're the most important thing in my life. No matter what changes, or what new things I do, I want to do them with you. Even if we don't do everything together. As long as I wake up beside you every morning, that's what matters."

"Even with your new friends and all the other things to experience?" He paused. "With other men out there to choose from? Here there was only me."

Peering intently into David's pale eyes, Isaac shook his head. "I don't want anyone else. You ground me. And I took it for granted. I took *you* for granted. It was so exciting to go to a real school, and meet English people who liked me. And I knew that I had you to take care of everything. To take care of me. Aaron and Jen too, and it made it so much easier for me to do what I wanted. I could go to the movies after school, or play video games at Derek's. Meanwhile, you were working your butt off."

"But I told you I didn't mind. I wanted you to do all those things. I wanted you to have fun. Explore the world."

Isaac propped himself up on his elbow again. "I know, and I love you for it. For wanting to take care of me. It felt good. It was like…I was a kid again. I didn't have to worry about money. I didn't even have chores to do. Not that school's easy, but it's not the same."

"You deserve to have a break. To enjoy it."

"What about you? You deserve it too. Why should I get to run around and do what I want while you and my brother support me? It's not right. I was selfish."

"No, Isaac. It wasn't your fault. I should have told you the truth."

"Yes, but I should have asked. *Really* asked. But I didn't want there to be anything wrong, David. It was so hard to leave our families, and if it wasn't perfect, I…I guess I was afraid of being a failure too. I was afraid you'd want to come back."

David shook his head forcefully.

"I was afraid I would too. You remember how it was in Red Hills? Kids would run away and more often than not they'd come back before too long. They couldn't make it out in the world. They'd have no choice, and even when I was little I could see how miserable they were. I didn't want that to be us."

"It won't be."

He thought of the phrase June had used. "I stuck my head in the sand. I knew deep down that something wasn't right. But it was like… I didn't want to know. I didn't want to pick at the scab and make it bleed. I wanted it to get better on its own. So I let you smile and say everything was fine. I took the easy way. I won't do it again. Neither of us is perfect."

He smiled softly. "I guess not. I was so afraid of messing up that I made everything so much worse. Gary said I don't have to have all the answers, but I felt like I did."

Isaac tensed. "Gary?" Was there someone David hadn't told him about?

"He owns a bar near the workshop. I got lost one night and he helped me. He's my friend. You should meet him one day. He has a son named Isaac."

“A son?” Isaac exhaled. “Is he married?”

“Uh-huh. He’s pretty old. His daughter’s in college. He’s really nice. You’d like him. We should go there when we get back.”

“I’d like that.” With a pang, Isaac sighed. “It feels so far away, doesn’t it? I want to be back there, and then I feel so guilty for not wanting to stay with Nathan and my family. I want to be there for them, but it’s so hard. Hiding the truth. Hiding ourselves.”

“It is. I wish I could make it better.”

Isaac smiled. “You want to protect me, but we have to protect each other. We’re supposed to be partners. Half and half.”

David nodded. “No more secrets. Deal?”

“Deal.” Isaac tucked his head under David’s chin and wrapped an arm tightly around his middle. He closed his eyes.

For a minute, they just breathed. Then Isaac murmured, “Tell me about drinking.”

David was quiet for so long that Isaac wasn’t sure he’d answer. Then he started talking, his voice a soft rumble.

“It…at first it was nothing. But then I started having the episodes. The panic attacks. It’s like…I can’t breathe, and I can’t see, and my knees give out, and I think I’m going to die right then and there. Like my heart will explode.”

Tears prickled Isaac’s eyes, and he nuzzled David’s neck, pressing kisses to his skin. He wanted to weep and shout at God that it was unfair for sweet David to suffer so very much, but it wouldn’t help now. “That’s awful,” he whispered.

After a moment, David went on. “And I started having something to drink afterward to calm me down. When we went out to the bar I’d get so nervous that I was going to say the wrong thing. Or do the wrong thing. Everyone seemed so…confident. And drinking seemed to help…even everything out. I found it helped when I panicked too. Then I started sneaking more to keep the attacks from coming. It started to get away from me.”

“It’s all right. We’ll figure everything out. We’ll fix this.”

David smiled softly. “Listen to you. So determined. So strong. I’m going to be strong again too.”

“You are. We’ll be strong together.”

“Together,” David echoed, lifting Isaac’s hand to kiss his palm with soft, damp lips before settling it over his heart.

Isaac caressed David’s chest, rubbing his cheek against him. “Is all this why you never wanted to come out and meet my friends from school?”

He nodded. “I was afraid they wouldn’t like me. That I’d say the wrong thing and embarrass you. You seemed to fit in so well, and I felt like a bad nail that bent and wouldn’t go into the wood while all

the others went in straight and perfect. And I know you wouldn't think that of me. I know. But as time went on I was more and more anxious. It doesn't make any sense, but…"

"It does." Isaac's nose tickled as he blinked back tears. "It does, even though I hate that you've ever felt that way. I hate that you've ever felt unhappy or anxious or not good enough even for one second. Because you are."

"I'm starting to believe that. I haven't had another drink. I won't. At least not in that way. Not to make things…numb. Jen's setting up an appointment to talk to a doctor. One of those tiny people. No wait —shrinks. Like Aaron goes to see. I'm not going to hide from my feelings anymore. Or from my fear. I'm going to face it, Isaac."

"We both will." With a shiver, Isaac pushed himself up over David, covering him and tugging the blanket higher as a breeze danced over them.

David took Isaac's face in his hands. "I love you. My little eechel."

"I love you. I love you for when you buy me chocolate and put it in my backpack as a surprise. For when we're having pizza, and you always get me an extra big glass of soda because you know the pepperoni makes me thirsty. I love you for how you hold my hand so tight when I'm scared. How you laugh at my jokes, and you make *me* laugh. I love the way you never get mad when I mess up and cut a plank the wrong size. The way you always leave the last cookie for me."

Smiling, David shook his head. "But that stuff's nothing."

"No." Isaac brushed their lips together tenderly. "That stuff's everything."

PART TWO

Chapter Nine

They'd just finished dressing when the train whistle sang in the distance, filling the night with its mournful cry. It had always made David sad in a way he couldn't describe when he'd heard the freight trains rumble by Zebulon. But even now, after all they'd seen and done in California, Isaac's face filled with wonder in the moonlight. He held his coat in both hands, a statue as he closed his eyes and listened. On his knees, David had been folding the blankets, and he stared up at Isaac.

After a minute, Isaac whispered, "Where do you think it's going?"

"Anywhere you want."

Isaac smiled at that. "All the way to the ocean, then." He shivered as the whistle sounded again.

"We'll go on a train soon. We'll ride anywhere. Everywhere."

"Can we? Really?" His smile widened. "I'd love that, David."

"Me too."

The train eventually passed, the rumble disappearing and the silence of the forest returning. Silver munched on an apple, her teeth crunching the core decisively. Isaac sighed. "I should go."

But neither of them moved. Looking at Isaac dressed in his old Amish clothes again, a tendril of fear suddenly curled through David's stomach. *It's only for now. While Nathan's sick. It's not for good.* David took the coat from Isaac's hands and threaded their fingers together. He was still on his knees, and Isaac smiled down at him.

"You're not making it easier to leave."

"It's strange to see you dressed like this again. And me in English clothes." It had been a relief to wear them again after he'd dressed Amish to see his family. "It's…"

"What?" Isaac let go of one of David's hands and smoothed down David's hair. "Tell me what's running through that head of yours."

"Suddenly I had a thought that you'll get stuck here. Seeing you in these clothes again…I guess it makes me worry." He let go of Isaac's hand and rubbed his face. "Sometimes everything makes me worry."

"They're just clothes, David. I'm still me. We're still us." He bent and kissed David's forehead before straightening again.

"I know. You're right." David blew out a long breath, the tension leeching away. He ran his hands up and down Isaac's legs.

"Keep doing that and I won't make it home before dawn." Isaac smiled slyly.

David chuckled, but skimmed his hands up Isaac's thighs and over

the flap covering his fly. He squeezed Isaac's cock gently.

"I love how you look right now," Isaac whispered. "On your knees for me."

Heat flared in him, and David licked his lips, gazing up at Isaac as he rubbed him harder through his pants. "Let me make you come again. I want to taste you."

Isaac's Adam's apple bobbed, and his lips parted as he nodded. David tore at the two buttons holding up the flap on Isaac's pants and pulled out his cock. Where the Amish clothes had caused him stress a minute ago, now excitement skittered down his spine as he knelt before Isaac in his verboten jeans, hoodie, and sneakers. He nosed at Isaac's groin, rubbing his face against the wiry hair there, feeling Isaac's shaft start to swell and his balls grow heavy.

David took Isaac's cock in his hand and stroked it, licking all around it and teasing the head. Isaac slid one hand into David's hair, and David looked up at him under his lashes. He said it without thinking. "Speak German."

Isaac's fingers tightened in David's hair, and he gasped softly. "*Gut."* He groaned. "*Bitte hör nicht auf*."

As Isaac murmured, telling David through his moans how good and beautiful he was, begging him not to stop, the guttural words spurred David on, sending fire through his veins. Isaac was clearly still sensitive from coming so recently, and he whimpered. But then he bit out, "*Härter*."

The harsh command to go harder made David think of his father's discipline or Bishop Yoder's preaching. It shouldn't have made his cock swell and strain even more, but it did all the same. David rubbed himself with the heel of one hand through his jeans. "*Etwa so*?" *Like this?*

"*Ja, schneller*."

Isaac throbbed in his mouth, stretching David's lips as he sucked him desperately, as fast as he could. He smelled like hay and sex, and David inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring as he sucked, spit dripping down his chin. With his free hand he touched Isaac's balls, increasing the pressure as Isaac cried out, pulling on David's hair painfully but still thrusting into his mouth as if it was too much and not enough at the same time. He muttered on in German, the words not making sense now.

When Isaac came he shuddered, gripping David's hair and filling his mouth with what was left from earlier. The familiar salty musk tasted so good, and David swallowed it down before licking Isaac clean and making him moan. Isaac sank to his knees, panting. He pushed David's hand away and quickly unzipped David's jeans, pulling him out and stroking hard.

They kissed messily as Isaac worked him, and David moaned. He wasn't sure he could come again, but he ached for it. Isaac pressed their foreheads together. Even in the night air, sweat beaded on their brows.

"*Guter Junge*," Isaac whispered.

David could only gasp as he shot over Isaac's hand, the pleasure ripping out of him roughly. Isaac repeated it, and David whined low in his throat. *Good boy*. It had made him come so hard, and he didn't know why. As he sat back, Isaac's hand still holding his cock loosely, David's cheeks flushed.

But Isaac looked at him with only tenderness. "Thank you."

He wasn't sure what for, but David nodded. "*Ich liebe dich*."

Isaac's smile lit up his face as he kissed David's hot cheeks, his lips soft and kind. "I love you too."

#

David winced as the door to June's house closed with a loud thud. It stuck a little, and he'd have to take a look at it and see what he could do. He took off his sneakers and tiptoed into the kitchen, jerking to a stop, his heart thumping as he saw Aaron sitting at the little round table. The light from digital clocks on the microwave and stove cast a faint bluish light. It was just after three o'clock.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you." Aaron wore a T-shirt and pajama bottoms, and he toyed with a mug. "I'm actually trying warm milk to get to sleep. Really should have just taken a NyQuil before bed, but it's too late now. I'd sleep until noon."

"Maybe you should. You need the sleep." David poured a glass of water and sat beside Aaron.

"Look who's talking." Aaron smiled softly. "Did you and Isaac talk things through?"

David nodded, and couldn't help but blush. He hoped it was too dark to see. "Uh-huh."

"Good. I'm glad." He leaned a little closer, squinting. Then he chuckled. "*Knutschfleck*."

David frowned, trying to think of the word. He'd never heard it. "What?"

"You've got a hickey on your neck."

He slapped his hand over the spot where Isaac had kissed and sucked. "I didn't know there was a name for it. In two languages, no less."

Aaron smiled. "In Red Hills, I learned it from Abraham Lapp when we were boys. It was very forbidden. I can't remember where he heard it."

"I'll have to remember that one."

Sipping his milk, Aaron sat quietly for a few moments. In the hall,

the grandfather clock ticked faintly. “Jen didn’t give me any details, but she said you’ve been struggling more than we thought with assimilating. I’m sorry I didn’t realize. I know just how hard it can be.”

“It’s not your fault. You’ve done so much for me. It was…” He tried to find the right words. “I guess it was a lot to take in. I felt so guilty for leaving my mother and the girls. I didn’t want to be a failure again.”

“You are *not* a failure, David.”

“I…I’m starting to believe that. I want to believe that, and I will. I…I was having panic attacks. But it’s getting better now.”

Aaron winced. “I’m so sorry you were going through that. I should have realized.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. It’s good to talk to you about it now. It feels like it gets easier every time. Like I get lighter.”

“The truth will set you free. That’s what they say, and I think they were onto something.” Aaron looked at him speculatively. “ So, how do you really feel about living in the city?”

David pondered it. “I don’t know. The city is so…much. But there are parts of it I really like.”

“Like what?”

“Getting pizza to come right to the door even at midnight.”

Aaron smiled. “Food delivery is a wonderful thing, it’s true. What else?”

“Walking by the ocean. Seeing all different kinds of people. Even though I hate the crowds on the bus, I like that everyone is different. And I can hold Isaac’s hand, and no one thinks it’s wrong. I mean, I know there are English people who think it’s wrong. Some of the people on TV say terrible things.”

Grimacing, Aaron said, “Those TV preachers are the worst. I try to forget that people so willfully ignorant exist.”

“Coming back here and having to hide again…it’s awful. It seems impossible, but I think I forgot how bad it feels to not have that freedom. I could never live that way again. Not ever. The things I don’t like about the city could never be as bad as that.”

“You know it doesn’t have to be all or nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

He took a sip of his milk. “There are all kinds of ways to live in the world. You don’t have to live right in the city forever. There are suburbs, and small towns. The country. It’s a whole wide world. A lot of ex-Amish still like a quieter life. They find a church that suits them. Find a place that suits them. The city doesn’t fit everyone. It doesn’t mean it’s that or coming back here. There’s all sorts of in-between.”

David pondered it, smiling to himself. “I’d still like to see more. I

didn't let myself really explore. It was so overwhelming that I just…I don't know how to explain it. Shut down, I guess. I think I'd still like to learn things and see things. Just without feeling so afraid."

"Of course. You and Isaac are still babies. You don't have to rush into any decisions. You have your whole lives ahead of you. I didn't have all the answers instantly. It took me a good while to figure out where I belonged. And when I met Jen, I realized that as long as I was with her, I'd be home."

Home. David swallowed hard. "It's the same way with Isaac. I want a home with him. Wherever that is."

"I want that for you guys too." He took another sip from his mug. "David, I hope you know I care about you. That you can always come to me if you need help. If you need anything. I know I'm not really your brother, but…"

Emotion rose in David, and he hoped his voice wouldn't crack. "But it feels like you are. It's been a long time since I've had a brother. It's a good feeling."

Aaron took a deep breath, his eyes glistening. "Thank you for that." He laughed shakily. "God, I'm a mess right now. Being here… seeing them again. It's harder than I thought." He ran his finger around the rim of his mug. "When I'm with my parents, I keep thinking, *Look at me! See me!* But then they do, and it's worse. The disappointment. The betrayal. I went against everything they believe in. On one level, I understand why they feel that shunning is the only way. That one day it'll bring me back to the church somehow. But it won't. Not ever."

David didn't know what to say, and he was afraid that if he tried, he might weep. He nodded instead. As hard as it was for him and Isaac to return, it was so much worse for Aaron. He wished there was some way he could make it better.

"Part of me wants to drive over there and take my brothers and sister away, and show them a world where they can be anything they want to be. Where they can love who they want. Where they can be free." He rubbed his face. "But I can't. And even if I could, would it be right? Some people find great joy in that life. They're not wrong anymore than I am."

"I know how you feel. Truly. I'm glad I'm not the only one who feels like this." He quickly added, "Not that I'm glad you feel bad. Just that I understand."

Aaron's lips lifted in a little smile. "I know what you mean. It's good to talk to you about this."

"It's good to talk to you too." David reached out and squeezed Aaron's shoulder for a moment. Aaron had always seemed like he had all the answers. Like he was never unsure. But David realized that

deep down they were all scared sometimes.

Aaron was quiet again. Then he said, “I just wish they didn’t use fear to keep their children in line. When I believed in God and it all, sometimes I’d lie in my bed late at night, terrified that I wouldn’t be good enough to go to heaven. That I wouldn’t be obedient enough, or pious. Isaac would be sleeping beside me, so peaceful and innocent. I envied him. I couldn’t remember a time that I didn’t worry. Then I joined the church.” He laughed bitterly. “I told myself everything would be better when I did. Like somehow all my fears and uncertainties would disappear. Like I would be new.”

David smiled sadly. “But it doesn’t work. It never does.”

“Nope.” Aaron rubbed his face again. “Thank God I didn’t marry poor Rebecca Eicher. My sister Abigail back in Red Hills says Rebecca’s very happy with her husband. Eight kids already.” He shook his head. “I can’t imagine it. I think if Jen and I manage to take care of one it’ll be a victory. Speaking of my sister, I need to write her and tell her I’m here. I suppose she’ll hear it anyway. If they knew she still exchanged letters with me she’d be in so much trouble. I just wish—”

After a few moments, David quietly asked, “What?”

“That I could live my life and that I wouldn’t be cut off from theirs. I know I made a terrible mistake joining the church. I pledged myself to God, and I broke my vow. But I was so lost.”

“But you found your way.” *I can too. I will.*

“I did.” He shook his head. “Man, listen to me blather on. I’m not supposed to be unloading all my crap on you. I’m sorry.”

“No!” David hadn’t meant to speak so loudly, and he lowered his voice. “I mean, you should. I tried to keep everything inside, and it didn’t help. It made it so much worse. So you should tell me. You don’t always have to be the strong one.” As he said the words that were an echo of Isaac’s, David felt how true they really were.

His voice tight, Aaron nodded. “You’re right.”

“That’s what brothers are for.” As the words left his mouth, David held his breath. Maybe it was too much to say that.

But Aaron only smiled. “It is.” He picked up his mug. “Hey, do you want some? Doesn’t take long in the microwave.”

“Sure. Thank you.”

Aaron puttered around in the darkness, the light from the fridge slicing the kitchen as he poured another mug of milk and refilled his. The house was completely still in these small hours, and even though he’d be tired in the morning, David was glad to be awake. The microwave hummed, and they watched the mugs rotating in the golden light until the machine beeped.

David sipped the warm milk gingerly, blowing on it as Aaron sat beside him again. “Can I borrow your little computer tomorrow?”

"Sure," Aaron answered. "Anytime,"

"I need to make a few calls for work. Send emails too, and I still find it hard to type on my phone."

Aaron chuckled. "It takes some getting used to. Have you ever seen Jen's mom trying to text? It's painful. You're much better than her—you're getting the hang of it all. I used to hate talking on the phone. It felt so awkward. But now it's second nature. Well, actually now most people communicate through clicking 'like' on Facebook."

"I should get one of those."

"I can show you how to sign up. Only takes a few minutes."

"That would be great. Thank you." David swallowed some of his milk, savoring the soothing warmth. "Is Jen coming soon?"

"Yeah. Won't be long now. They're short-staffed at the moment, but she's cleared it with her chief. Just has to do another two shifts before she comes." He smiled tightly. "I wish she was here now, but I can't exactly argue with saving lives."

"I'm glad it won't be too much longer. She's been so good to me. I don't know how I'll ever repay you both."

"You don't need to. We're family now. That's just how it works."

Family. He repeated the word in his mind as he sipped from his mug. The milk was soothing, and David swallowed gratefully. The night was wearing on, but for a little while longer, he and Aaron sat together in the stillness, not needing to say anything else.

#

The clatter of the buggy thundering up June's drive had David racing bleary eyed downstairs just past dawn. He skidded out the door as Anna hauled Kaffi to a stop. David raced across the gravel, not caring that it stung his bare feet. "What is it?" he called.

She hopped down, her long black dress fluttering around her ankles. "Nothing bad. I just have to be quick." She reached back into the buggy and thrust a straw hat at him. "Should be warm enough today for summer hats."

He took it, feeling the old familiar brim with his fingers. "But why?"

Anna straightened her black bonnet and grinned. "There's a frolic at Joseph Yoder's—our old place, I mean. He's planting soybeans on the land we had left, and he made an arrangement with Josiah Otto to take back a few acres. Also building a new harvest shed, so I thought you'd want to come and help. You're the best carpenter, and there's no way anyone would say you couldn't help out."

"Is everything okay?" Aaron called from the porch.

David nodded, and Aaron went back inside with a smile. Anna watched him go and whispered, "Wow. He's handsome."

David had to laugh. "He is." His smile faded. "Do you really think

it's a good idea for me to go to a frolic?" He'd always enjoyed them, especially the barn raisings.

"Yes. Show them you're not ashamed. Not afraid."

"But what if I am? Everyone will be there. You know how they'll stare."

"Stare right back, big brother."

"But I should go to the hospital and see how Nathan's doing. See Isaac."

"You can go later this afternoon. I'm sure Isaac will understand." She glanced up at the brightening blue sky. "It's going to be the best day yet this year. Come on. Just for a few hours."

He sighed. "How can I say no?"

"You can't. Now go get changed and I'll drive you over."

After telling Aaron and passing a message for Isaac, David quickly tugged on his old Amish clothes. But this time he wore his black briefs, feeling a ridiculous thrill at breaking the Ordnung. By eight he and Anna pulled up outside their old home. Folks milled around, already working. Some of them peered at the buggy with open curiosity.

Anna squinted. "It looks the same."

It did, and it gave David's heart a twist that his family didn't live there anymore. He wondered who was in his old room—the room where he'd spent night after night dreaming of Isaac and sinful things. His gaze automatically went to the barn, and for a moment he was glad he was still sitting in the buggy, for his knees might have given out.

It looked just as he'd left it aside from a fresh coat of dark red paint. He could almost see Isaac there, with his bashful smile and freckles dancing across his nose, sweat dampening his hair on the back of his neck as he worked. He could smell the sawdust and hay and horse, even though they were too far away.

"Coming?" Anna asked as she hitched Kaffi to the post alongside the line of buggies and horses.

"Uh-huh." David stepped down and pet his old horse, feeding him an apple from his pocket and suddenly feeling very conspicuous.

Anna had to go join the women, and David walked closer to the house with her so he could see Mother and the girls. Mary glanced up from her apple peeling and smiled for a moment. The girls squealed his name and ran to him. Mother, who sat in a kitchen chair that had been brought outside, watched and then beckoned him over. David could feel the eyes of the women boring into him. It was a strange mix of curiosity, resentment, and hope.

"You've come to help," Mother stated.

"Yes. Anna said they're building a new shed. I don't have my tools

with me, but I'd love to lend a hand."

There was silence for a few heartbeats. "I am sure it will be appreciated," Mother said. The other women murmured in apparent agreement. Mother studied him, but said nothing else.

He realized with a jolt that Grace was there by a pile of carrots, her eyes on her shoes and her body rigid. With her dark hair and eyes, she was the spitting image of her mother nearby, who pointedly didn't meet his gaze. Not that he could blame them after what he'd done. Poor Grace, who he'd barely dated but had still disappointed more than she could probably say—or *would* ever say.

It seemed wrong not to at least say a few words. Aware of all the eyes locked on him, David shuffled over to Grace. "I…hello."

Not meeting his gaze, Grace grabbed a carrot and peeled it with deft strokes, the skin falling away in neat strips. "Hello." It was barely a whisper.

"How are you?"

Grace looked ready to snap in half. She moved on to the next carrot, peeling vigorously. "Well."

"I…" He glanced around at all the women, who didn't try to pretend they weren't hanging on every word. "Maybe we can go somewhere and talk?" The least he owed her was a proper apology.

At this, Grace looked up. "What is there to say?" She hesitated, something like hope brightening her eyes. "Unless you're back to stay?"

David could practically feel Mother behind him vibrating with anticipation and tension. "Uh…"

Grace peeled off a long strip, her head down again. "I'll pray for you."

"I'd better get to work." His face hot, David backed away. He had half a mind to run down the driveway and not look back. What had he been thinking coming here? It would just make everything harder.

"It's good to see you here, my David." Mother smiled then, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Where you belong."

"Thank you," David managed to get out. He wasn't staying. But to see his mother smile at him like that again tightened his throat all the same, even though she surely knew deep down it was a lie—he didn't belong here. He never really had.

He glanced up and saw Deacon Stoltzfus watching him, his gaze heavy and unreadable.

"It's not too late."

He'd always thought the deacon hated him, but even he still had faith in David. But it could never be.

Some men and boys were already in the fields planting, and others were gathered beyond the barn where the new shed would

clearly go, stacks of lumber marking the spot. The murmur of conversation ceased as David neared, and when he reached them, there was silence.

Then Josiah Otto from the next farm smiled widely and walked to David with his hand out. “How good to see you, my friend!”

David shook his hand gratefully, and while some of the men merely nodded, Joseph Yoder took David’s hand enthusiastically. He was around David’s age.

“Am I fortunate enough to have you helping today?” Joseph nodded to the lumber.

“Of course. It’s my pleasure. Put me to work.”

“Actually, could you look over the plans first? Make sure we’re building it the right way?”

David happily examined the plans and made a few suggestions. “You see? It’ll have a better foundation that way.”

Josiah Otto nodded eagerly. “Joseph, I’d do whatever David says is best. He surely knows.” He glanced over at a little boy. “Abram! Put that down.” Only several years older than David, he already had five children. As Joseph fetched David some spare tools, Josiah leaned in and lowered his voice. “Are you back for good?”

“No. I’m not staying.”

Josiah’s face fell, but he nodded. “Maybe one day you’ll change your mind.”

David felt the pull to go along with it, but he shook his head. “I don’t think so. This isn’t my path.”

For a long moment, Josiah was silent. “I can’t agree with you, but you’re here today, and I’m glad of it.” He lifted his straw hat and wiped his brow, pushing back his thick black bangs. “You were always a good neighbor, David. You stood by your word and helped me when I needed it. You should know that I paid Eli what I still owed your family for the land. It worked out for everyone to sell a bit back to Joseph now that he’s living here and wants to farm it. We’re working together on planting. But you could have taken all that land back when I wasn’t able to pay. I’m forever grateful that you didn’t.”

Josiah’s words warmed him, and David smiled. “I’m glad I could help.”

Josiah smiled, but then sobered. “Have you been to the hospital to see Nathan Byler?”

“Yes. He’s very ill. He’s the reason for my visit.”

“I heard their oldest is here visiting as well. I remember him a little from Red Hills. And Isaac’s back too?”

David nodded. “They want to help their brother. They’ve been very good to me in the world, so I’m here to support them. And to see my mother and sisters, of course.”

“We’re all praying for that family.”

“I know they appreciate it.”

“The Lord’s path for us is a mysterious one sometimes. It doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Well, I suppose we’d best get started.” He clapped a friendly hand on David’s arm.

As the morning wore on and the sun filled the sky, David found he was glad he was there too. The breeze carried a hint of cherry blossoms, and it was invigorating to saw and hammer and craft again. It was hard to believe that it had been less than a week since he’d left San Francisco. His muscles were pleasurably sore, and as he worked side by side with his former neighbors, peace filled him.

He knew he could never truly be Amish again, but there were some things he’d miss about it all of his days.

Chapter Ten

Even the horses were watching as Isaac climbed down from the buggy with Ephraim. Katie and Joseph clambered out of the back, running off to see their friends. No one was in school on a frolic day, and children's laughter rang out amid the chatter of work.

Ephraim gave Isaac's arm a tug. "Come on. Just ignore everyone."

Isaac tried his best, but the whispers slithered through the new grass like snakes. He nodded to people, and when they asked after Nathan while giving him looks that ranged from suspicious to sympathetic, he and Ephraim took turns answering. Isaac was just telling Elijah Raber that Nathan had felt well enough to eat his whole lunch the day before when he stopped, staring.

Elijah frowned. "What was that about lunch?"

"Uh…" Isaac stared at the frame of a new shed, where David swung his hammer, his shirt rolled up over his elbows and forearms flexing. For a moment Isaac had tumbled back in time to when David sent his heart fluttering and he wouldn't admit why. *Couldn't* admit why, even to himself.

Ephraim jumped in. "Nathan was feeling a little better yesterday afternoon." When they walked on, Ephraim hissed, "What's with you? Elijah didn't say anything bad. You were miles away."

"Sorry. I'm distracted." Isaac forced his gaze away from David, only to find Mervin standing frozen a few feet away as if caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"I'll go join in," Ephraim muttered before hurrying away.

Mervin clutched a bag of seed in one hand, and his chest rose and fell rapidly. People bustled around nearby, but they were mostly alone near the broad side of the barn. Isaac tried to smile. "Hi." Even though they'd sat in the tree house for an hour the other day, the reality that things would never be the old easy way between them caught in the back of Isaac's throat.

"Hi." Mervin's voice was scratchy.

"How are you?"

"Fine, thank you." He nodded a greeting to one of the Kauffman boys walking by, and glanced around nervously. "Isaac, I've been thinking."

"Okay. About what?"

I've known you my whole life, and I know you're not bad."

Isaac's heart thumped. "You're right—I'm not. David isn't either."

"I know. You wouldn't…care about him if he was. But I was thinking, if you both went to Bishop Yoder and confessed, he could

help you." Mervin started speaking faster, gesturing with his hand the way he always did when he was excited. "I know that if you stayed, God would help you. *I* would help you. We all would. It doesn't have to be this way."

"This is the way I am, Mervin. It'll never change. And I don't want it to. Neither does David. I know you're saying this because you care, but this is the way God made us."

Mervin's wide face creased. "You truly do believe that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then I hope you'll be happy. I hope…I hope I'll see you again."

"I hope so too. Be happy. I wish you a good life with Sadie." Isaac ached to reach out and hug him, but knew he couldn't. "You were always a good friend. You still are."

"So were you, Isaac. Just…take care of yourself." Nodding a goodbye, Mervin plodded back toward the fields.

Isaac watched him go, knowing it very well might be the last time he ever saw his best friend. He swallowed thickly and pulled his straw hat low over his face. When he went to join the men working on the shed, he tried not to look at David. But when Joseph called out to Isaac, David jerked his head up, almost knocking it on a new beam. Isaac tried not to laugh, the moment of joy a welcome respite.

It was odd to be at a frolic, once again pretending David didn't make his heart leap. Of course now they'd run off to the world together, although the community didn't know how *together* they were. Isaac smiled to himself as he sawed off a corner joist, but his smile vanished when Samuel Schrock started in on all the reasons Isaac and David should come back to Zebulon and be baptized.

By the time they were able to escape, lunch was being served. With a long look at Isaac, David disappeared into the barn, and Isaac followed, his pulse fluttering as he remembered the hours he and David had spent there. He had half a mind to haul the door closed behind them and bolt the door.

"My worktable's gone," David said wistfully as he turned in a slow circle. He walked to a stall and ran his hand over the wood. "It's all so familiar but different." He tipped back his head and stared at the loft arching high overhead. "I loved this place," he whispered.

"Me too. It was our place. I mean, it was yours, but…"

"No. It was ours." David smiled softly. "After only that first day, I knew it would never be the same without you here. I used to wish—" He broke off, and his smile soured. "Never mind. Wishes are for children and fools. Not for men."

"Then I must be a fool. Tell me."

Sighing, David walked the old floorboards, which creaked under

his boots as he gazed into the rafters. “I used to wish that this really was our place. Just the two of us, and we could work and live and love, and no one would mind.”

Isaac’s heart clenched. “Who says we can’t one day? I miss it, David. I still want to go to school, but you never know where we’ll end up.”

Smiling wistfully, David shook his head. “No room for a barn in San Francisco. And barns cost money. A lot of money.”

“But maybe one day. Don’t stop wishing, David. Please don’t ever stop.” The tender look David gave him in response made Isaac smile himself, and a thought struck him. With another glance at the empty doorway, he hurried down the narrow corridor past the stalls to the back corner of the barn. But the shower David had rigged was gone—just another rectangle now with hay scattered here and there.

David spoke from behind him. “I’m sure Mother had Eli dismantle it and make sure no one knew it was ever there.”

Isaac sighed. “Yes. It was so clever, though.”

David pressed up against him, and heat flashed through Isaac as they stumbled into the stall. He knew they shouldn’t, but Isaac didn’t resist, turning in David’s arms and moaning softly as David pushed him against the wall, leaning against him from shoulder to hip. He smelled like sawdust and sweat and fresh grass, and Isaac licked David’s throat, his hands roaming over him.

They kissed roughly, hats tumbling to the floor, and David thrust against him, hoisting up one of Isaac’s legs to wrap around his hip. “I’m wearing the underwear you like,” he murmured.

Blood rushed to Isaac’s cock. “The really tight ones?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Isaac ground against him. “Show me.” He dropped his leg to give David room to move.

With quick fingers, David unfastened his pants, and they fell to his ankles. The briefs were black and short, and the bulge in the front made Isaac want to drop to his knees and suck his thick cock until David was shooting down his throat. It was so wrong and dangerous, but somehow felt as necessary as breathing. Like it would prove that even with their Amish clothes, they were still the same inside. *I’m a… a* cocksucker*, and I’m proud of it. I love him. I don’t want anyone to “help” me.* But as he kissed David and palmed his shaft, footsteps creaked in the barn.

“David? Isaac? Are you in here?” Anna called. “Oh, Joseph! I like what you’ve done with the place.”

Eyes wide, David hauled up his pants and they straightened their clothing. Anna continued talking far too loudly—Joseph Yoder must have thought she had suddenly developed a hearing problem—and

fortunately Isaac's burgeoning erection flagged even as his heart pounded. He wiped his mouth and jammed his hat back on his head. He was sure he was just as flushed as David, but after a minute they walked out, trying to appear casual.

"There you are! You're going to miss lunch." Anna smiled sweetly.

"I hope you don't mind us taking a look around the old place," David said to Joseph. "Lots of memories here."

"Of course not. Spend as much time as you'd like. I'd better go get some chicken before it's gone."

As Joseph left, Isaac realized Ephraim was in the doorway. Ephraim stared at them with a strange expression Isaac couldn't place. Not anger, but a deep stillness that sent a shiver up Isaac's spine.

"Ephraim, did you save any pie, or did you eat a dozen yourself? I wouldn't put it past you," Anna teased.

Isaac laughed nervously—his braying goat of a guffaw that made his ears go red. David didn't look at him, and Isaac noticed there was hay stuck on the brim of David's hat. He resisted the urge to pick it off.

"I saved plenty." Ephraim smiled then, barely. He still stared at Isaac and David.

Isaac's throat was dry. "Great. I love pie." His brother's gaze felt like an English laser burning right through him.

"Better get out there." Ephraim turned and was gone.

"You two be more careful! Goodness!" Anna hissed as he scurried out.

"There's hay in your hat," Isaac muttered. "And that really was stupid of us."

David took off his hat and pulled the strands free. "Yes. It really was." He toyed with the straw brim. "Isaac, what are we doing here? It's like we're play acting. It feels like…I don't know. Like this is some strange dream. Like I don't know who we really are right now. I mean, I know we're us, but I hate disappointing them. It doesn't feel honest."

"I know." Isaac rubbed his face. "But until Nathan's better, or at least until we get the test results, I have to be here. You don't, though. Not that I don't want you here. Of course I do. But if you want to go back to San Francisco, I'll understand."

David shook his head. "If you're here, so am I."

Isaac knew it was selfish, but gratitude swelled up to fill all the corners of him. With a quick glance at the door, he squeezed David's hand, wishing he could still hold it tight as they took their places for fried chicken and shoofly pie.

#

"When's Nathan coming back?"

They all paused at Joseph's question, spoons in midair or stuck into the thick beef stew Sarah Raber had brought over after the frolic. Isaac watched his parents across the table. Father had a piece of carrot stuck in his beard, and he fished it out before speaking.

"We don't know. We pray he will be home with us soon."

Isaac pulled his spoon through the stew. "Still no word on the test results?" When his parents had returned from the hospital in the early evening, they'd been subdued. Isaac had wanted to ask if they'd argued with Aaron, but had bit his tongue and only asked how Nathan had been feeling. The answer had been noncommittal and gruff, which meant *not good*.

"Should be tomorrow," Mother said.

"Oh. Okay." Isaac forced another bite.

"The frolic was good today," Katie ventured in the ensuing silence. "Isaac and David really helped a lot with the new shed. I was watching."

Beside him, Isaac could swear Ephraim tensed. *Is he suspicious? What did he see at the barn?* Isaac cast his mind back. David had hay stuck in his hat, and they'd surely both been flushed. He thought of how sometimes you can just tell things for no one reason in particular. *Could Ephraim tell?*

Joseph swallowed a bite of beef. "Is there a way for English people to go to heaven?" He frowned. "Do some of them go? The good ones?"

"That is not our concern," Mother said. "We wish them well, but they choose to live that way."

Isaac thought of all the people he'd met in San Francisco. Jen and her family—Seventh Day Adventists who seemed to be good Christians. Would they not go to heaven? Or Lola and Chris and Derek, who had been so kind and taken him under their wing. He actually had no idea if they were religious or not. Or what about Mr. Silverstein, his favorite teacher? Was he going to hell for being Jewish? Isaac supposed he'd see them all there.

"What's funny?" Katie asked.

Isaac realized he was smirking. "Nothing." He shoved some food in his mouth. It strangely made him feel better to contemplate all the good people who didn't meet the Amish measure. There was June too, and Danielle at the hospital. Aaron, of course, who didn't believe there even was a heaven or hell, which still made Isaac's belly churn with acid. The idea of hell scared him, but the thought of nothing terrified him even more.

"I miss Nathan." Joseph pouted. "It's not fair."

"Sometimes God tests us in His own way," Father murmured.

"Was he feeling sick for a long time?" Isaac asked before he could

help himself. He shifted on the wooden bench, reaching into his pocket for the knife.

All eyes focused on him. Mother answered quietly, “Not enough to go to the doctor. We were going to take him to the chiropractor in Warren to see if there was something off.”

“But—” Isaac bit his lip.

Mother was rigid. “But what?”

“But when he started snoring all of a sudden, was that a clue? I should have known it wasn’t right.”

Mother’s face softened. “Oh, Isaac. There wasn’t anything you could have done. We’ve asked ourselves the same questions.”

“Sometimes the Lord has a plan we cannot understand,” Father said quietly. “It is not our place to question.”

It was strangely reassuring, and as they finished their meal in silence, it didn’t feel heavy.

While Katie and Mother cleaned, Isaac grabbed the bucket. “I’m going to have a bath tonight. Can you leave out the big pot?”

Katie’s brow creased. “But it’s not Saturday.”

“I know. But I got really dirty at the frolic.” *And I’m used to showering every day—not bathing only once a week.* It was strange to think of how used he’d become to the English ways.

Mother’s lips were tight, but she didn’t protest. Isaac hauled in bucket after bucket and heated the water on the stove in batches before pouring it into the old tub in the corner of the kitchen. Once Katie and Mother retired to the living room with the others to read quietly, Isaac slipped off his clothes and sank under the water.

His knees stuck out, and he leaned his head back against the battered metal. He wished he had his phone so he could check his texts and emails. He wondered if David had decided to spend the night at Eli Helmuth’s. He’d gone back with them for supper, and Isaac had watched them climb into the buggy, Mary keeping her eyes averted until the last moment, when she glanced back at Isaac with such longing.

He lathered up the homemade soap, which smelled like honey. He and David had lived in Zebulon with their secret for months, but now after being back only a few days Isaac was drained and weary. He loved seeing his family again, but what was the point if he couldn’t ever be himself? They’d never accept the truth.

When Isaac padded upstairs in his old nightshirt, skin still damp, he got to the top landing and realized he still had to go outside to use the creaky old outhouse before bed. He’d stayed in the bath until his fingers looked like prunes and the water wasn’t even warm, and now the house was still, with no lantern light escaping under the bedroom doors.

Isaac edged into his room and tossed his clothes on top of his trunk. He supposed the room and the trunk and the bed weren't truly his anymore, but they had been for so long that he still knew his way around in the dark. Scooping up a fresh pair of socks, he sat on the side of his bed and unrolled them.

"David moved in with Aaron in the city too."

Isaac pressed his hand to his chest as he inhaled sharply. He hadn't realized Ephraim was awake, but now he could make out that his brother was on his back, staring at the ceiling. Beyond him, Joseph was fast asleep, mouth open and limbs splayed. Isaac laughed, but it was uneasy.

"You scared me."

"Sorry." Ephraim was silent for a few moments, and he kept his voice very low. "So, David lives there too. Right?"

"Uh-huh." The hair on Isaac's arms stood as gooseflesh shivered over him.

"Do you share a room?"

Now Isaac's heart skipped and *boom-boom-boomed.* His mouth was dry. "Yes." Ephraim was silent for so long that Isaac thought he might have fallen asleep after all. He held his breath, afraid to move.

"Do you share a bed?" Ephraim spoke barely above a whisper, but it sounded loud enough to wake the whole house.

Isaac's pulse rushed in his ears, the pressure building in his head and chest. Should Isaac lie to his brother? *Could* he? It was like he'd swallowed sand. He craned his head to see Joseph on the other side of Ephraim to make sure he was still sleeping. "Maybe we should go downstairs. Or outside."

Ephraim still spoke quietly, but waved his hand dismissively. "He could sleep through a stampede of cows. Especially after today." After a few heartbeats, he repeated the question. "Do you and David sleep in the same bed?"

Isaac couldn't lie, although part of him still wanted to desperately if it meant not losing his brother. He clutched the socks he was still holding and got the word out. "Yes."

Ephraim took this in silently, breathing shallowly. "Are you like brothers?"

He felt like throwing up. "No."

"Do you…with him? Do you do *that*?"

His face burned, and his whole head felt hot. "Yes," Isaac managed, barely a whisper.

Ephraim gasped softly. "You really do? You and David are… you're…"

"We're gay." Isaac took a shuddering breath.

Still staring at the ceiling, Ephraim was rigid beneath his quilt.

“Gay,” he repeated. “Is that what they call it?”

“Yes,” Isaac croaked.

“Were you doing it with him before you ran away?”

“Yes.”

“But…”

“I know it’s hard to understand.” Isaac wished Aaron was here to help explain. Somehow he had a way of making things sound so good.

“But isn’t it disgusting?”

Isaac’s chest ached as though he’d been kicked by a mule. “Not to us.”

“Why would you want to do that? With a *boy*?”

“It comes natural. It feels normal.”

Ephraim’s face scrunched up. “How can that be?”

“It just is. It’s who we are.”

“Do you…do you *kiss* him?” Ephraim asked, disbelief clear in his voice. He still kept his gaze locked on the ceiling.

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand why you’d want to.”

“That’s because you’re not gay.” Isaac realized he was tearing into his socks, and dropped them beside him on the quilt.

Ephraim seemed to ponder that. “I guess that makes sense.”

Isaac’s heart leapt. “Do you think so?”

“If you say that’s how it is, I believe you. I know you don’t lie. Well, I guess you do. But you’re not lying now. I’d be able to tell.”

“I’m really not. I swear, Ephraim. I’m telling you the truth, and I wanted so much to tell you before.”

Ephraim tore his gaze from the ceiling and looked at him now, the hurt clear even in the night. “Why didn’t you?”

“I was afraid. I’m sorry.”

“Does Aaron know?”

“Of course. He supports us. He thinks it’s great.”

Ephraim echoed, “Great?”

“There are people in the world who don’t just…tolerate differences. They think differences are good. Aaron and his wife are people like that. They love us the way we are.”

Ephraim seemed to mull this over. “Do you love him? David?”

Isaac didn’t hesitate. “With all my heart.”

Now Ephraim sat and swung his legs over the bed so he was facing Isaac. He glanced over his shoulder at Joseph, and then leaned his elbows on his knees, his eyes bright and imploring in the faint moonlight. “But Isaac,” he whispered. “You’re not supposed to. You know God thinks it’s wrong. The Bible says so. How can you really *love* him that way?”

“It’s just the way it is. We were born different. But we have all the

same feelings you do. Just not for girls."

Ephraim grimaced, and then leaned closer. "Aren't you afraid of going to hell?"

Isaac wanted to laugh because if he didn't he might cry and cry. "I am. But if I'm going to hell anyway for living English, then what does it matter what else I do? I'll never be able to be a good Amish man and have a wife. I used to pray I could feel the things I was supposed to, but now…"

"What?"

"Now I'm glad I am who I am. If God doesn't make mistakes, then I'm the way He made me. David is too. And we love each other. We're happy when we're together. I don't think love should be a sin. I can't believe it is." As Isaac spoke, it was though something hard and sharp that had been lodged in his chest broke free.

"I don't know what to believe." Ephraim's eyes glistened. "But I know you're my brother, and I want you to be happy."

Isaac swallowed hard. "I want you to be happy too."

"But Mother and Father will never accept this."

"No. They won't."

"No Amish will. Not really."

"No." Isaac wished he had some water. And after getting clean, now he felt sweat prickle his neck.

"That must be hard to bear."

Not trusting his voice, Isaac could only nod.

Ephraim reached out and squeezed Isaac's hand for a moment. "Thank you for telling me. I'm sorry I can't be more help."

He cleared his throat. "You are. You have been. Thank you."

Ephraim leaned back. "We should get some sleep. Lots of extra work tomorrow after the frolic."

It seemed there was nothing else to say, and Ephraim curled back under his quilt and closed his eyes. Joseph slept on, and Isaac finished putting on his socks. It had happened—someone else in his family had found out the truth, and…and maybe it would be okay?

With his feet stuffed into his shoes, he hurried into the night to the outhouse in the stand of trees beyond the house, a swirl of relief and hope in his heart.

Chapter Eleven

"Can't sleep?"

David had heard Mary's light footsteps coming into the barn, so he wasn't surprised to see her step into the circle of lantern light. He smiled as he brushed Kaffi's mane. "I guess not. Are you having trouble sharing with Anna again? You two must like having your own rooms."

Mary smiled, toying with the end of her braid. She hadn't put on her cap, which was as rebellious as Mary got. "I don't mind. Especially if it means having you home again." She reached into the pocket of her coat, which she'd pulled on over her nightgown, and pulled out a bulky piece of folded cloth. "Cookie?"

"I could never resist your sugar cookies." He put down the comb and plucked a cookie from the top. "Mmm. Just as good as I remember." He savored the creamy, crumbly sweetness.

She chewed on her own cookie. "You did wonderful work today. Joseph Yoder has the best harvest shed in Zebulon now."

"Thank you." It had been undeniably nice to help build the shed. So peaceful. "I see Jacob Miller's quite a good carpenter." Even in the low light, he could spot his sister's cheeks flush.

"Yes," she said simply.

"I enjoyed talking with him today." He truly had. Jacob had seemed eager to ingratiate himself to David, although he'd been cooler to Isaac. "He seems a steady young man. Is he driving you home from the singing on Sunday?"

"Uh-huh. Are you…are you going to go?"

He heard her unspoken question. *Is Isaac going?* "I don't think that's a good idea." He gave Kaffi a piece of apple, holding it flat as Kaffi's rough tongue stroked his palm. He wasn't wearing his hat, and he rubbed his cheek against her mane. "I can't imagine going to church. Not after what happened."

Mary brushed a wisp of golden hair from her forehead and passed him another cookie. "David—" She took a deep breath. "You were so close. It was your day to be baptized. Why did you run away?"

"I wish I could explain it. There were so many reasons, Mary. I know it hurts you and Mother and the girls that I didn't join the church. I'm sorry."

Her wide eyes were so earnest. "But it isn't too late. I know one has to be certain before pledging our word to God. You had doubts. We all do sometimes. But you're home now. It's never too late to find forgiveness."

Would you forgive me for stealing the boy you loved? He knew it wasn't that simple—that Isaac would never have loved her properly—but he couldn't stop the guilt that burned in him. "You're so good and sweet, my Mary. I wish I could be the brother you deserve."

She stepped toward him. "But you are! You did so much for all of us, all these years. After—" She licked her lips. "After Joshua, our lives changed so much, moving here and having stricter rules. But we knew we could always depend on you. When Father went to heaven, you worked to the bone to keep us safe and well. I thank God every day for such a brother."

"But I left you. I ran away." Without warning, David's knees trembled, and he gripped the side of the stall. His eyes burned, and he tingled all over.

"David?" Her brow creased. "Are you sick?"

Breathe. In and out. I'm okay. He managed to shake his head. As he exhaled, the spike in his heart rate evened out. He was all right. He could do this. David hated that this could happen again, but Jen's voice echoed in his mind.

"If it happens again it doesn't mean you did anything wrong. It's not going to go away overnight. Just work through it one step at a time. It's a journey."

Mary still watched him closely. "Should I wake Mother and El—Father?"

Inhaling deeply, David exhaled again and cleared his throat. "No. I'm fine." He quirked a smile to put her mind at ease. "Perhaps I'm tired after all."

"Have another cookie. The sugar will help." Mary thrust one into his hand.

David ate it gratefully. "Thank you."

She held the back of her hand to his forehead. "Hmm. A little warm, but I don't think you have a fever. Stick out your tongue."

He did, rolling his eyes together at the same time. Mary's laughter filled his heart, and he pretended to wince as she slapped his arm. "I'm fine. I promise." *I am. I'm fine. I'm strong enough.* Kaffi snorted and batted his head against David. "Oops. Someone's feeling neglected." He picked up the comb and resumed brushing Kaffi's mane even though he'd worked out any knots long before Mary had arrived.

She pet Kaffi gently. "He misses you. We all do, of course." She was quiet for a long moment, and then her voice wavered. "You're really going, aren't you?"

"Yes. Mary, you know I can't stay."

"Why *not*? What's so great out there? What's better than us?" Her voice rose, and Kaffi sidestepped at the outburst.

David's heart clenched. "It's not *better* than you. But it's where I

have to be. Where I want to be. It's where I'm happy. Where I can be free."

"We're free here. I know we have rules, but we have such peace here." She sighed. "But you've never really been happy, have you? There was always something missing. A light, maybe. I can't explain it. But I see it in you now. And I'm glad to see you shine, even though it hurts me."

"I never wanted to hurt you." David wasn't sure he'd ever heard Mary say so much at once. Anna had tended to do most of the talking.

"And I see it in Isaac too." Her eyes glistened as her voice rose. "And I hate it! I know I shouldn't, but I do." She balled up her fists and hit her thighs. "Why aren't we good enough for you?"

"Mary…" He struggled to find the right words.

Like the air *whooshing* from a children's balloon, her anger evaporated, and tears fell. She whispered, "Why wasn't I good enough for him?"

"Oh, Mary. It wasn't you." He took her shoulders gently. "You're kind and generous and true. I've been so blessed to have you for a sister. I know Isaac wished he could have felt the same way for you that you felt for him."

Another tear slipped down her cheek. "Truly?"

"Yes. But he…he couldn't force his heart to feel it. It wasn't anything you did wrong. I promise, Mary." He pulled her into his arms, holding her close. "There was nothing you could have done differently. It wasn't your fault." *He's gay. I'm gay. He's my boyfriend. I love him too.* The words were on his tongue, but he forced them down. He couldn't tell Mary without asking Isaac first. It wouldn't be right.

She sobbed against his chest, her arms folded against him. She seemed as small as Sarah in that moment, and David wished he could protect her always. Mary mumbled something, and he ran his hand over her head tenderly. "Hmm?"

She sniffed loudly. "I used to dream that we'd all live here together. At the old farm, I mean. When the girls were grown, you and Grace could move into the big house, and you'd build Mother a little dawdy haus out back. And Isaac and I could have our house just a stone's throw away, and you and he would have your carpentry business. Our children would play together, and everything would be right."

He swallowed thickly. "That's a beautiful dream."

"Seems so silly now."

"You can still have it. It'll just be a little different than you planned. I've realized that's what happens in life. Things change, but it doesn't have to be bad. It can be wonderful."

She clung to him. "Is leaving really what's right for Isaac?"

David thought of Isaac on the cable car, holding the pole as they sailed down toward the bay, his face so bright it could have been the sun. “Yes.”

Sniffing again, Mary leaned back to look up into his face. “And for you?”

“Yes. It isn’t always easy, but yes.”

She wiped her eyes and nodded before dropping her head. For a few minutes they stood there as he rubbed her back, and her tears faded.

“David?” Her voice was muffled in his shirt.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

Mary stepped back and took his hands. Her eyes were clear now, and she squeezed his fingers. “It was difficult when you left. But things are okay now. It gave Eli and Mother the push they needed. We have a good home here, and Eli provides well for us. He cares for us. There was such a burden on your shoulders. Too much. It’s better now.” She shook her head and quickly added, “Not that it’s better *without* you. But we’re all right, David. You don’t need to worry about us. Don’t be burdened anymore.”

It was though he could feel his soul grow lighter. “Thank you.”

“I’ll pray for you every day.”

From others in Zebulon it felt like a condemnation, but from Mary it was pure love. David kissed her forehead and held her to his heart again.

#

“You want to drive?”

David glanced at June as they walked toward her pickup. “Me?”

“No, the deer over by the fence. There is actually a deer—look.”

He turned to see the doe, standing frozen and unblinking. They stopped and watched, and for almost a minute none of them moved a muscle. Then, tentatively, the deer picked her way beyond the fence on gangly legs, still watching them closely. When she bounded away back to the forest, white tail in the air, David found he was smiling.

“Don’t see that in the city,” he murmured.

“No, I don’t imagine you do.” June tossed him the keys. “Come on. I don’t feel like driving.”

The metal was cold in the early morning. David tucked his plastic coffee mug—which somehow kept the liquid warm without feeling hot on the outside—under his arm as he played with the keys and glanced back at the house. “Maybe I should wait for Aaron.”

“He’ll be up before long, and he has the rental. You said yourself he needs the sleep. Of course you do too, but here you are, bright eyed and bushy tailed. Well, awake, at least. You don’t have to drive if you don’t want. It was only an idea.” She held out her hand for the keys.

It was silly to be scared. He'd driven these country roads before going to the drive-in. It wasn't the city with all the buses and honking and cable cars and people rushing this way and that. "It's okay. I'll drive." He'd tossed and turned for a few hours in Anna's room before leaving a note and walking back to June's past a sleeping Zebulon.

The engine rattled as he turned the key, and then roared to life. It was still early, and David enjoyed the empty road and the hum of the truck. He ran his hands over the smooth rubbery touch of the steering wheel. "I really should get my license. It's just, in San Francisco it's… different."

"Pretty intimidating, huh? I don't much like driving in the city either." I avoid it when I can." June ran a hand through her tawny hair and tucked it behind her ears before sipping from her coffee. "How are you finding it now that it's been a few months?"

David hesitated as he braked for a stop sign at a crossroads. "It's…different."

June snorted. "That's an understatement. San Francisco and northern Minnesota are surely different."

He laughed a little. "Just a bit. There are things I really like about it—being close to the water, and that you can eat any kind of food you'd ever want. That Isaac and I can hold hands and no one will even look twice. But sometimes I feel like everyone is speaking a foreign language. There are all these rules, but it's not like the Ordnung. They aren't written down anywhere. You know what I mean? Like the little smiley faces in emails? You're not supposed to use those with suppliers. Apparently it's unprofessional. But I was just trying to be nice."

"Ah, yes. Unwritten rules. One of the hardest things to understand when you're suffering from culture shock."

"From what?"

June fiddled with the air vent in front of her. "Culture shock. It's that confusion and disorientation you feel when you start living a different lifestyle. Happens to most people who move to another country, or just to another place."

David rolled around the words in his mind. "June, I think I have that."

"I think that's a safe diagnosis, Dr. Lantz. One case of culture shock. But you're seeking treatment and you'll be good as new before you know it."

He smiled. June always had a way of putting things.

"And just ask whenever you have questions. You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now tell me more about the city. What's not so good about it?"

"Well… I wish I had a better workshop. I miss my old barn. In the

city it's cramped and dirty and noisy." He shuddered as he thought of the music thumping through the walls and into his skull. "I miss the fresh air and the high ceiling. How quiet it was except for Kaffi in his stall or the cicadas singing in summer."

"Mmm. Makes perfect sense to me." June sipped her coffee.

He wanted to drink some of his own, but as they neared the main road, he didn't risk taking a hand off the wheel. "But I'll adjust. I need a little more time to—"

June followed his gaze to the buggy that trundled along the side of the road. In an instant David knew it was the Bylers', with old Roy plodding toward the hospital. He made sure to leave plenty of room and slow as he passed by. Knowing Isaac was in the back tugged at him, and he couldn't stop from looking over as they passed even though he couldn't see him.

Isaac's parents sat up front, their eyes on the road. It was a good thing they didn't notice him as David drove by with June, but part of him wished they had. Part of him wanted to pull over and take Isaac from the buggy to defy them. Part of him wanted to kiss Isaac right in front of them so they would finally *see*. So they would finally understand, even if they never really could.

"Guess I'll keep my visit short," June said. "Don't think my presence will be particularly welcome."

They still had about forty-five minutes by David's calculations, although visiting hours hadn't quite started yet when he and June rode the elevator to the third floor. But when they peeked into Nathan's room, Danielle was there. She smiled as she adjusted the tube stuck into Nathan's arm.

"Good morning. You're a little early, but as long as you keep it quiet, I'll let it slide. I'm sure Nathan will be glad to see you." She squeezed his arm.

Nathan smiled faintly, and David was alarmed to see how much paler and weaker he appeared. His hair was almost gone but for a few tufts left on his scalp. Aaron had said it was to be expected after chemotherapy, but it still hurt David's heart. He waved awkwardly, not sure what to say. The remnants of Nathan's breakfast congealed on a tray in front of him, and it looked as though he'd thrown up in a plastic container Danielle whisked into the bathroom.

"You're that English lady," Nathan said softly. His voice was hoarse.

"I am indeed. I just wanted to pop in and say hi. How's that hospital food treating you?" June asked.

He made a noise and scrunched up his face, and Danielle laughed as she came back. "That about sums it up," she agreed.

"If you can have a little treat, I made some peanut butter fudge.

It's my granddaddy's recipe, and although it's not as good as his, I'm told mine comes the closest." June pulled a tin out of her canvas tote bag.

Nathan brightened. "Thank you."

"I also thought you might have fun with some puzzles. It's these Japanese things with numbers. Totally addictive." She took out a thick paper book and a box of pencils.

Danielle nodded. "Sudoku. *Completely* addictive. You'll love it."

As June sat by Nathan's bed and explained the puzzles, Danielle caught David's eye and nodded toward the door. He followed her into the hall.

She kept her voice low. "How are you doing? Must be a trip being back here, huh?"

He traced the seam of a tile with the toe of his sneaker. "It's… does a trip mean that it's weird?"

"Yep. Weird, strange, surreal."

"Then yes. Definitely."

"Especially with Isaac back with his family, I imagine. Only temporary though, right?" She shook her head. "I shouldn't be so nosy, I know. But I'm rooting for you two."

"I don't mind. And thank you. We're going to be fine." *We will be. We'll be just fine.*

"How's your mom doing? Is she walking yet?"

"She is. She uses a cane, but not for much longer, I hope. I'm going to visit again later today."

"Send her my best when you do."

He nodded, and told her a little more about his mother. June left before the Bylers arrived, and David found himself alone with Nathan, Danielle off seeing other patients. Nathan seemed to be enjoying the puzzles, but put down his pencil and peered at David intently. David resisted the urge to squirm. He cleared his throat. "Do you need anything?"

Nathan shook his head. After another few moments, he said, "Aaron seems nice."

"He is. He's been so wonderful to me and Isaac. His wife too. Her name's Jen. She's a doctor and she works in a hospital like this. Well, bigger than this one."

Nathan's brow furrowed. "How can she be a doctor? Who cooks?"

"Aaron does, or they go to restaurants. There are restaurants that deliver too. You call them on the phone or even order on the internet, and a man brings the food to your door."

"What kind of food?"

"Any kind."

Nathan seemed to ponder this. He tentatively chewed a tiny piece

of fudge and offered the tin to David. “I didn’t know a girl could be a doctor until I came here. Do they do other jobs too?”

“Uh-huh.” David bit into the fudge, which was creamy and sweet and tasted like real peanuts. “They do everything.”

“Huh. I can’t imagine that in Zebulon.”

David chuckled. “No. I can’t either.”

“It’s strange to think that I have a brother I don’t remember. I mean, I know my other sisters still live in Red Hills and I barely remember them, but…it’s different.”

“It is.” There were footsteps in the hall, and David’s heart skipped. What would the Bylers say about him talking to Nathan alone? But a couple of strangers went by, and he exhaled. Then he wondered what was keeping them, and tried not to worry.

“I guess Aaron will never go back to being Amish, will he? Not with a doctor wife.”

“No. He won’t. He’s a teacher, and he loves his job. He teaches math to kids like you.”

“A teacher?” Nathan frowned. “But women teach. So in the world men do their jobs too?”

“I guess they do. It’s pretty cool if you ask me.”

“What is?” Mrs. Byler strode into the room and stood on Nathan’s other side, her hand finding his shoulder.

“Oh, n—nothing,” David stammered as he jumped to his feet.

Mr. Byler and Isaac followed into the room, and Isaac smiled fleetingly at David before looking at Nathan. The corners of his mouth pulled down, and he seemed to sag a little as he took in his brother’s worsened condition.

“I was just…” David motioned to the puzzle book. “Teaching him how to play. It’s nothing bad.”

His face stony, Mr. Byler marched to the bed and picked up the Sudoku book. “What is this?”

“Just puzzles with numbers. You use a pencil, so it’s nothing forbidden.”

“We’ll be the judge of that.” Mr. Byler flipped through the pages. “Hmm.”

“I’ll let you…” David backed toward the door and almost bumped into Aaron.

Aaron smiled tightly and ignored his parents. “How are you feeling today, Nathan?”

Nathan glanced between his mother and father and shrugged. No one looked at each other, and the awkward tension made David nauseous. He wanted to catch Isaac’s gaze before he escaped, but then Dr. Tyler bustled into the room.

“Knock, knock. Oh, good. You’re all here. We’ve got good news

from the lab this morning." She smiled at Nathan. "Your brother's a match for you."

Mrs. Byler inhaled sharply. "Isaac can donate what Nathan needs?"

Dr. Tyler was still smiling. "No—your other son. Aaron."

Chapter Twelve

Aaron.

Isaac's stomach swooped, and it felt as though all the air in the room had just been sucked out with a giant vacuum cleaner. Mother and Father stared at each other, having one of their mute conversations. With his hat in one hand, Isaac tapped his fingers against the folded knife in his pocket as the silence stretched out. Dr. Tyler frowned, the faint wrinkles around her eyes growing more pronounced.

Aaron squared his shoulders. His voice sounded too loud in the sudden hush. "Great. Let me know when we can get started."

Isaac stole a glance at David, who smiled softly as their eyes locked. Isaac yearned to reach for his hand or feel David's arm around him. He was dying to tell David that Ephraim had figured out the truth, and that he seemed…possibly okay with it? Isaac wasn't sure. That morning they'd done the milking in mostly silence aside from talking about the pickup from the local dairy who bought the milk. But Ephraim had never been chatty before the sun was up. Isaac had wanted desperately to ask him what he was thinking, but hadn't dared.

"This is good news." Dr. Tyler's frown deepened. "The best news we could hope for. Is there a problem I don't know about?"

"Absolutely not," Aaron answered. "I'm ready to do whatever it takes."

Dr. Tyler looked at Isaac's parents and then smiled at Nathan. "Kiddo, why don't we leave so you can have a little nap. Come on, everyone. Too many people in here."

Nathan's eyes glistened with unshed tears, and Isaac squeezed his hand before he left. "It's okay. It's good news, like she said."

Dr. Tyler ushered them out. "Let's discuss this. Follow me."

David hung back, nodding to Isaac. Isaac hurried to catch up with the incredibly fast Dr. Tyler, who could have been one of those speed walker people he'd seen on TV that Jen had laughed at merrily. Her white coat swirled behind her, and her shoes *tap-tap-tapped.* Aaron and their parents marched along behind her, and soon they were in a little windowless room with rectangular table surrounded by eight or so chairs.

"Please sit." Dr. Tyler took the chair at the head of the table.

Father sat opposite her with Mother to his right, and Aaron took one of the seats on the left side of the table near the doctor. Isaac hesitated before sitting between Aaron and their father. Dr. Tyler

folded her hands on the table. She wore no rings or makeup on her face, and her nails were unpolished. Aside from her short hair, Isaac could almost have imagined her as an Amish woman. He wondered what his parents thought about a female doctor.

"All right. What's the issue?"

"There isn't one. If I'm a match, I'll gladly give my bone marrow to Nathan." Aaron's hands were fisted.

"You're definitely a match. You understand that the procedure to harvest the cells can be extremely painful?"

Aaron didn't hesitate. "Yes. I'll do it."

"Good. However, I'm sensing some tension here, to say the least. Mr. and Mrs. Byler, is there something I don't know? When we discussed a transplant you indicated there were no religious objections. Dr. Beharry and his team will be here in the morning, and he and I agree Nathan's best hope is his brother's stem cells. You can see for yourselves how weak he's becoming. We're treating him aggressively because the cancer is attacking aggressively. A bone marrow transplant could give him the ammunition he needs to fight this. Frankly, it's his only hope of survival."

Isaac looked between his parents as they had another silent discussion. He couldn't believe they'd hesitate for even a moment. Bile rose in his throat, and he wanted to scream and shout. Forget the church and its rules. This was Nathan's life.

Father cleared his throat. "The problem is that our son was excommunicated. He has been cast out until he repents his sins and yields to the Lord. We can accept nothing from him."

"Don't tell me you're even considering letting Nathan die to spite me!" Aaron's cheeks were red, and his nostrils flared. "Jesus Christ, this is ridiculous! Shun me all you want, but don't punish Nathan."

Father didn't so much as glance at Aaron as he addressed the doctor. "We must consult our bishop and preachers for their guidance on this matter before we make a decision."

Dr. Tyler sighed. "I strongly urge you to act quickly and to allow the transplant. Nathan is deteriorating. We need a decision by morning at the latest."

As she talked about test results and medical things Isaac didn't really understand, his mind buzzed. Here was the thing they'd hoped for, and because it was Aaron their parents were suddenly hesitating. It was the only thing that could save Nathan. Surely God wouldn't deny him that chance? Isaac jiggled his foot under the table, biting his lip from spewing out all the words he wanted to say.

"Aaron, we should get started on some shots for you to boost your white blood cell count," she said. "Dr. Beharry is sending a new formula via courier. Usually we'd give you the white cell boosters for

up to a week before donation, but we simply don't have the time to spare. Fortunately they've developed this express formula and had good results. I can explain it all in more detail."

"Whatever it takes." Aaron vibrated with tension. "I just want to help my brother."

"We'll return to Zebulon and speak to Bishop Yoder." Father pushed back his chair and picked up his hat. "Thank you, Doctor Tyler."

That was that, and Isaac had no choice but to follow, leaving Aaron behind with a last glance, and a wave to David in the hall. David started toward them, his brows drawn together, but Isaac shook his head.

They'd just gotten to the hospital, and the buggy ride home was an eternity. Isaac closed his eyes and rested his head on his knees, bumping along and praying the bishop would say yes. *Please, please, please. Let Nathan live, no matter what it takes.*

They were turning onto their driveway when he realized where they were. "Why didn't you go straight to Bishop Yoder's?" he called.

Father reined in Roy by the house. "You can help your brothers with the work."

Anger tore through him like a stray spark to hay, and Isaac jumped out of the buggy and marched around to the front where Mother and Father sat on the bench. "There's no time! You shouldn't even be asking the bishop!"

"*Isaac*." Trembling, Mother pressed her lips together. "Please. Leave this to us."

"He's going to *die*!" Isaac's throat felt raw already and it was almost a scream. He heard a whimper and whirled to find Katie outside the door, tears in her eyes. Ephraim and Joseph were running over from the barn. Isaac knew he should stop—that he had to get hold of himself, but the words flung out of his mouth like wooden pick-up sticks scattered across the floor. "You know it! We all know it! He's *dying*. Aaron can save him."

"You think we don't know this?" Mother shuddered, her voice strained. "We know our son is dying. But we must stay true to our beliefs." She glanced at Father. When he said nothing, she went on, her hands fisted in her lap. "Faith is how he'll be saved. It has to be the way."

Father still clutched the reins. "Isaac, you will not speak in this manner. You will show respect. We will ask Bishop Yoder what is the right way. It is what we must do for our boy."

"Aaron's still your son. Let him give Nathan what he needs to get better."

"Aaron's a match?" Ephraim asked. He wasn't wearing his hat,

and his sandy curls were wild after his sprint. “Why won’t you let him do it?”

“We didn’t say we won’t,” Father answered. “Just that we must consult the bishop first. We must ensure it’s the right thing in God’s eyes.”

“Forget about God!” As much as he loved God, in his heart he knew that He wouldn’t allow Nathan to die for the sake of a rule in the Ordnung. Only men would allow that, for rules were the dominion of men no matter how much they tried to say otherwise.

Mother gasped. “Isaac!”

Katie sobbed now, and Isaac wished he could fix it all. “If Nathan dies because Bishop Yoder won’t allow the transplant, I won’t blame God. God gave us this way to save him.”

Ephraim had an arm around both Joseph and Katie, holding them to his sides. “Isaac’s right.”

“You are children. We will determine right and wrong. You will obey. This is the way of things.” Father’s voice was surprisingly steady. “We will receive guidance from our leaders and make our choice.”

Isaac’s head was light, and his skin prickled hot all over. “I pray you’ll do everything on this earth to save Nathan. I pray you’ll choose him no matter what the bishop thinks. Aaron may not be Amish anymore, but I’m proud to call him my brother. I’ve tried to be a good son, and obey your wishes.” He glanced at his siblings. “I really have tried.”

Ephraim nodded. “We know.”

In that moment, Isaac knew it was truly over. He’d never come home again, and he never really had. He’d never sleep another night under his parents’ roof. He wouldn’t wake to that same square of glass peeking out at the world, or hear the distant train whistle, or feel the dewy grass under his feet. He wouldn’t smell rich bread baking or give Silver a sweet apple for her work as she rubbed her nose against him.

“I can’t stay here.” He ran a palm down his plain cotton shirt, knowing this was the last day he’d ever dress in these clothes.

“Isaac, please,” Mother begged. “Don’t turn away from us now. Don’t turn away from the Lord.”

“I’ll do everything I can to help. But I’m not Amish anymore. I never will be again.”

Father hung his head, and his shoulders hitched once before he was still. Mother breathed shallowly, her eyes shining, and Joseph was crying now along with Katie. Isaac longed to hold them all and make it better. He gazed helplessly at Ephraim, who blinked away the hint of tears.

“You can go.” Ephraim didn’t say it unkindly, or tersely, but with

quiet acceptance. Maybe even blessing.

Isaac's voice broke when he tried to speak. "Wh—" He cleared his throat and tried again. "What about the work?"

"We'll manage. I promise." Ephraim smiled now, looking more like a man than Isaac could ever remember. "You've done all you can. It's enough."

Isaac couldn't swallow down his sob, and he closed the distance to his siblings and pulled them into his arms. "I love you all," he choked out. "I always will." They clung to him, Katie and Joseph's little hands digging into his back.

Ephraim stepped back and met Isaac's eyes. "Be happy."

Turning to his parents, who still sat rigid and defeated in the buggy, Isaac wiped at his eyes. He could hardly breathe, and he sniffed loudly. Everything felt wet—his cheeks and throat and nose. "Aaron and I will still be at June's. We'll see you at the hospital. We want to help, and I hope you'll let us. I hope you'll let Aaron. He's still your son. So am I. We love you, even if you can't forgive us for leaving."

He felt like there should be more to say; that he should have prepared better for a moment so important. But it had come upon him without warning, just as it had when he'd run with David the first time. So quickly, but there was no turning back.

Mother quivered, and Father was a slumped statue as Isaac passed them and started toward the road. He forced himself to walk steadily, and waited until he was around the bend to run, flying toward June's and leaving his old life behind forever.

#

"Isaac?"

Blinking, Isaac found David in the doorway of June's guest room. June hadn't been home when he'd knocked, barely able to catch his breath after running and running. But the front door was unlocked, and after waiting a spell on the porch, Isaac had gone inside, not able to wait another minute until he took off his Amish clothes. He'd balled them up in the corner after carefully removing the knife from his pocket and tucking it into his suitcase. He'd had a shower and curled up naked under the quilt in the room David was using.

David rushed to the side of the bed, brushing a hand over Isaac's damp hair. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm—" Isaac croaked. He cleared his throat and reached out a hand to clasp David's. "It's over."

"What do you mean?" David squeezed his fingers, his pale eyes searching Isaac's face.

"I left. I'm not going back again. I can't stay there. I can't play Amish."

“Oh, Isaac. I’m sorry.” Leaning over, David kissed his forehead. “I can’t do it either. I tried to stay at Eli’s last night. It felt so wrong. I know it’s a good life for them, but it’s not ours now. It can’t be.”

Shivering, Isaac pulled back the quilt. “Come to bed. It’s been too long.”

After stripping naked, David snuggled in next to him and pulled the quilt over them tightly. He rubbed Isaac’s back gently. “Was it bad?”

Isaac nodded against David’s chest, the sparse hair tickling his cheek. “I got so mad at them for asking the bishop about taking Aaron’s bone marrow. I told them I was leaving for good. I know it hurts them, but it’s the only way. But Ephraim understood, at least.” His mouth was dry. “David, he knows the truth. The whole truth.”

David froze. “You told him?”

“Only when he asked. He saw us at the barn, and I guess it just… clicked. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” He traced his fingers up and down Isaac’s spine again, and rubbed his foot over Isaac’s calf. “How did he react?”

“He was shocked. I don’t think he likes the idea, but…he didn’t turn his back on me. He said I should be happy.”

“Good. You should. I…” David hesitated. “I wanted to tell Mary so badly. But I don’t know how she’ll react. It might make it worse. She’s still hurt about you.”

“I’m sorry,” Isaac whispered.

David tightened his grasp. “Don’t be. You never let her believe anything would happen. She’ll marry Jacob Miller or another good man, and have a happy life. This is where she belongs, and you never could.”

Isaac listened to the faint beating of David’s heart beneath his ear. “I wish we didn’t have to hurt so many people we love to be together.”

“Me too.”

“Do you think Bishop Yoder will say yes? About Aaron’s bone marrow?”

“I pray he will. Oh, I almost forgot—Aaron dropped me off here before he went to Minneapolis to pick up Jen. She left San Francisco this morning.”

Isaac smiled. “Good. I miss her, and it’ll help Aaron to have her here. Help all of us. Was Aaron okay when he left?” He wished he’d been able to talk more with him, but soon he would.

“He was…all right. Angry and frustrated. Hurt.” David was quiet for a few moments, and Isaac closed his eyes, listening to him breath and feeling the gentle rise and fall beneath his cheek. Then David spoke again. “I know why they shun—because being Amish is

everything. No matter what, as long as someone becomes Amish again, that's all that matters. It's always the…what do the English say? The bottom line? And they want to make it so bad that we'll have no choice but to return because we can't live without our families. But we can. Eventually, we can."

Isaac kissed David's chest. "We make our own family."

"Yes." He caressed Isaac's back and shoulder. "We will. We do." He ran his fingers around David's belly button. "It feels like we've been here for months. It's hardly even been a week."

"I know. It's like time stopped and still sped up somehow." He sighed, and it was warm through Isaac's hair.

The afternoon was waning, and the sun glowed over the corner of the room and the simple dresser there. Isaac rolled onto his back for a better look. He could tell it was one of David's, and he smiled to himself. They had the house to themselves, and he could imagine that one day they'd have a house not so different from June's. Not that he didn't like Aaron and Jen's townhouse in the city, but sometimes he really did miss the quiet, and now he realized how much. One day he and David would be able to have a place that was all their own, anywhere they wanted.

"What?" David ran his finger over Isaac's lips. "What are you smiling about?" he teased.

"Just thinking about having our own bedroom one day. With our own furniture and pictures. You can make our bed."

David's blue eyes lit up. "You can help. We'll do it together."

"Yes. I'd like that. David, do you think eventually you'd like to live in the country again?"

David's smile grew. "I would. Yes."

"Me too." He picked up David's hand and toyed with his fingers. "We could have a little place that's just ours. Close enough to San Francisco to visit. I still love the city, and my school, but…I've missed this. The fresh air. The quiet. I didn't even know I had until we came back."

"One day we'll find the perfect place." He pressed a kiss to Isaac's cheek. "We'll save our money, and it might take a long time, but we'll get there."

Nodding, Isaac tugged David on top of him. "Tell me everything will be okay."

And David did, with his lips and hands, kissing and caressing Isaac from his head to his toes, loving every part of him until he tingled. When David spread Isaac's thighs and splayed him open with his legs bent, Isaac moaned. "Please," he murmured, lifting his ass. *I'm not Amish anymore. This is who I am. This is who I want to be.*

He'd always loved David's long fingers, which could carve a hunk

of wood into something so intricate and fine. They felt so good on his body, teasing around the rim of his hole now. Isaac held his knees to his shoulders, opening for David as much as he could, biting his lip as he waited.

It felt like an eternity of fluttering touches, Isaac's thighs trembling as David's warm breath finally washed across Isaac's hole. The first press of lips was barely a kiss. Isaac held his breath, waiting. Then David licked from the bottom of Isaac's crease, the flat of his tongue dragging up to Isaac's ass and sending sparks shooting along his spine.

"More, *more*," Isaac mumbled. "My David."

David's hands were on Isaac's cheeks, spreading him as he licked again from the top. His breath was hot against Isaac's tender flesh, and Isaac moaned in anticipation, gasping when David suddenly thrust his tongue inside him. His face was buried in Isaac's ass, and he licked and spit inside him.

Isaac wanted to shout with the joy of it—the feeling of being opened to his core for David to see and accept. Being licked like that made him feel like they were like the animals in the barn, but not in a bad way. As he'd run back to June's, the weight of his family's disappointment had splintered him, scattering him this way and that. Now with David loving him, the pieces fit back together, and he was whole again. He was his truest self, and David saw that. David loved him just the way he was. Every bit of him—even the dirty places.

Isaac's balls were tight and his cock hard against his belly. He thought he might come just from David's tongue, but he wanted more. He threaded his fingers into David's hair and tugged him up. "Need you."

David's cheeks were flushed, and he panted softly as he reached blindly for the nightstand and the bottle of hand cream there. It smelled like lavender, and Isaac could imagine one of June's sisters using it when she visited. He burst out laughing as David smeared it over his straining dick.

On his knees, David jerked his head up, smiling. "What?"

"Just thinking that June probably never expected that cream to be used like this."

David grinned and leaned over Isaac. "Probably not." He bent his head and licked Isaac's nipples, sucking and biting gently. Then he pushed the head of his cock into Isaac, and Isaac wasn't laughing anymore.

He grunted and groaned, loving the uncomfortable stretch that gave way to such delicious fullness as he bore down and David went hip deep. Isaac's knees were still up, and he held his legs open.

"You're so beautiful like this," David muttered. "All the time, but

like this, so…free."

A bead of sweat formed on David's brow, and Isaac lifted his head to lick it. "You are too. My David."

The air was full of lavender and sex, and Isaac tasted his own musk on David's tongue as they kissed messily, their teeth bumping as David thrust in and out. They both grunted—*uh, uh, uh*—and moaned —*oh, oh, oh*—and yes, Isaac was *whole* again as David filled him.

"This is how it should be," Isaac mumbled. "How we should be. Not a sin." *Not a sin. Not going to hell for this. This is love.* For the first time, he believed it without a shred of lingering shame or doubt or fear.

He loved hearing David's groans of pleasure, which heated his blood to a boil. Isaac's cock leaked against his stomach, and David wrapped a hand around him. It only took a few strokes until the sparks blazed through him in a rush of flame. Jerking and squeezing down on David, Isaac came. David's eyes were wild as he slammed into him, their flesh slapping together, David's balls smacking Isaac's ass with every grunt.

Isaac urged him on with bold, breathy words. "I want you to come inside me. I love how it feels." He thought of the woods, and how the German praise had reached down and pulled out something new from inside David. "Guter Junge."

Crying out, David emptied inside Isaac. He shuddered and gasped, and Isaac wrapped his legs around David's waist, holding him there as he came deeply. They panted, and David collapsed on top of him, his breath wet on Isaac's collarbone. It was sticky and messy, and Isaac wanted to stay forever.

David finally raised his head, and they kissed slowly. "My good boy," Isaac murmured. His gaze dropping like a stone, David blushed furiously. Isaac took his face between his palms. "Look at me. Don't be embarrassed. Please don't. I like it."

Smiling shyly, David still blushed. "You don't think it's…weird?"

"No." He rubbed his calf over David's ass. "I think those English shrinks would come up with all sorts of reasons for it, but I don't care what it is." He kissed David softly. "You're good. You're my good boy."

David buried his face in Isaac's neck. "I want to be good."

"You are." Isaac caressed his back. David was getting awfully heavy, but he only held him closer. "I'll show you how good you are. How good you can be."

"How long before you can fuck me?" David mumbled.

Isaac laughed. "At least a few more minutes."

"That long?" David teased. "I suppose I can wait."

"Well, if you do that thing with your tongue again it might be

shorter."

He licked a stripe up Isaac's neck. "Let's stay in bed the rest of the day. Let's forget everything else."

"Okay. You talked me into it."

They both jumped as a car door slammed outside, and David practically hit the ceiling. They burst out laughing as they scurried to clean up and get dressed before June came upstairs. In the bathroom, Isaac splashed cold water on his face and stared into the mirror. His smile faded as everything else came crashing back—his family and Nathan, and *oh God is he going to die? Please don't let him die.*

He reached up to flatten down his hair over his forehead before he remembered it was okay now. He wondered if June had any hair gel he could borrow. In the meantime he brushed his hair back and surveyed his reflection.

He liked who he saw.

Chapter Thirteen

"Oh my God, that smells amazing," Jen said by way of greeting as she and Aaron walked into June's house. "Isaac! I didn't think I'd see you until tomorrow. How are my boys?" She flung out her arms and hugged Isaac and David together.

David hugged her back, leaning down and wanting to lift her off her feet. "I'm so glad you're here. How was your trip?"

She waved a hand. "Long. Tedious. The usual."

Aaron carried in a small suitcase and blinked in surprise. "Isaac? What happened? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I guess I had it out with them. I told them I can't stay there anymore. So, here I am. Lucky for me June says I can stay."

"Lucky for all of us," Jen said. "This must be the woman herself."

Wiping her hands on a dish towel, June came from the kitchen. "So lovely to meet you." She shook Jen's hand and then they hugged anyway.

David smiled, pleased to see two of his favorite people finally meeting. "I think I'll have to live to a hundred and fifty before I could repay June for everything she's done for me."

June laughed easily. "I'll be pushing up daisies by then for sure, honey. I'll take an IOU."

Soon they were in June's dining room around a large square table David had made, with room for two seats on each side. June had cooked something called beef stroganoff, and it was creamy and tangy and *delicious*. He could smell chocolate cake baking, and his stomach growled for it even though he was stuffing himself with the beef and noodles. He listened to Isaac beside him relaying his conversation with his parents.

Isaac shrugged when he was finished. "I just couldn't stay."

"We don't blame you." Aaron pushed his fork around his plate, spearing a piece of beef but not eating it. "I'm obviously incredibly biased, but I think it's better this way. They need to accept that you're not coming back for good, no matter how guilty they try to make you feel. Or, to be fair, how much they love you and want you in Zebulon." He smiled sharply. "See? I'm trying to be fair."

"You're doing a great job." Jen rubbed his arm. "I need to work on that, because right now all I want to do is scream at them and tell them they suck donkey balls." She cleared her throat and looked to June. "Uh, excuse my language."

But June only laughed. "No apology necessary."

David felt a swell of affection for Jen and her crude language. "It

hasn't been the same without you."

She winked at him, and then her smile faded. "Do you guys think this bishop will say yes to the bone marrow? I get that there are rules about shunning and all that crap, but it's not as if Aaron will be handing him the blood vials himself. There'll be plenty of middlemen."

"I honestly don't know." Aaron nodded to Isaac and David. "What do you think? He wasn't bishop in Red Hills, and I barely remember him. Is he the type to let an innocent kid die to follow arcane and arbitrary rules that are ultimately completely meaningless?" His lips tightened. "This fairness thing is a process, clearly."

"You're being plenty fair." Jen shook her head. "Nathan's life is on the line. That's the only thing that should matter here. Not that your parents will care what I think."

Aaron gave her a little smile. "No—but I do."

"So do we," David added. He pondered her initial question. "I don't know for sure, but I don't think Bishop Yoder will say no. He let my mother use a wheelchair with rubber tires after her accident. And the machines Nathan's hooked up to use electricity. To refuse would seem too cruel."

Isaac gripped his fork. "I'm not sure what Deacon Stoltzfus will say though. Not that he's in charge, but…he's so tough on the rules. He once added Abraham's Mary to the Bann for two weeks for her dress being half an inch too short. She'd grown and her mother was making a new one, but Mrs. Kaufmann had just had a new baby and was sick in bed. But he wouldn't take any excuses."

"Wait, is this a different Mary? Not your sister?" Jen asked David.

"Right. A different Mary."

"How do you not get confused with so many people having the same first and last names?"

June chuckled. "I've often wondered the same thing. Is Abraham Mary's father?"

"Yes. That's how we keep people straight." David frowned. "I never really thought about it."

"Or you use a nickname," Isaac added. "Like, Silo Marvin is the one with the silo. Obviously."

"Huh. Okay, so what does that mean?" Jen asked. "The Bann?"

"It's the same as being shunned, but it's only temporary," Isaac answered. "A punishment for breaking a rule."

"For the sake of a few millimeters of cotton? Wowsa. And I thought Adventists were strict." Jen laughed. To Aaron she added, "Babe, next time I complain about my family, please remind me of this conversation."

Aaron's lips quirked up. "You can depend on it."

As June asked more about Jen's Adventist upbringing, David took another bite of creamy noodles, this time with a hunk of mushroom. The mention of the deacon brought back memories of Joshua, and poor Martha and Rachel. He could see Joshua climbing out their bedroom window, running off to get drunk and high without a thought about the consequences. The consequences they'd all paid instead. The consequences that had brought them here to Minnesota.

What would his life be like if they hadn't? Not that he could ever be glad it had happened, but as he looked around the table at the people closest to him in the whole world—the people who were his family just as much as his blood kin, and maybe even more—David felt a profound sense of gratitude for being there. His eyes burned, and he blinked rapidly.

Isaac ran his palm over David's knee under the table. "Okay?" he whispered. Nodding, David took Isaac's hand and squeezed, not trusting himself to speak.

When dinner was over, Jen hopped up to the dishes despite June's protestations that she had a dishwasher. "I'm in the mood for some scrubbing," Jen insisted.

Aaron raised an eyebrow. "Everyone mark this date, because it is the first—and I predict last—time Dr. Jennifer Paculba will be in the mood for any kind of housework, let alone dishes."

"I'll help," David said, stacking the rest of the plates and following Jen.

June finally gave in, and when she, Isaac and Aaron were in the living room watching the end of the news, David rolled up the sleeves of his sweatshirt. "What do you want me to do?"

Jen put the plug into the sink. "I'll wash and you dry?"

"Sounds good." The chocolate cake was digesting in his very full belly, and David found it peaceful, wiping the plates and cutlery as Jen passed them to him and placing them on the plastic drying rack. They worked in companionable silence for a minute.

"So, how's it going?" she asked quietly. "Have you been managing?"

"It's okay, it's not a secret." He nodded toward the living room. "They all know. I told them."

Jen smiled. "June too? Good."

"There have been a few bad moments, but…" He dried the tines of a fork. "One time Isaac was there, and I talked to him. It really helped. I still have the feelings sometimes, but I don't need to drink. I won't either."

"I'm glad to hear it." Jen tucked a chunk of thick black hair behind her ear. "I think it's like a pressure valve. When you talk to other people about how you're feeling, it can be scary, but it relieves

the pressure so you don't explode. You know what I mean? Sorry, that was a shitty metaphor, but it's been a long-ass day."

David laughed. "It was a good metaphor. I liked it."

"You're way too nice."

"But that really is how it feels, you're right. Like terrible pressure, and it boils over."

Jen scrubbed a pot, the water in the sink sloshing around. "I wasn't sure how long you'd be here, so I got you in to see Dr. Curameng in a few weeks. He's great."

"I want to see him, but what about the money?" David's gut tightened. "I haven't done any work all week, and I'll be late on projects, and—"

"Stop." She held up a soapy hand. "Don't worry. We'll figure it all out. You've got enough on your plate being back in this emotional minefield. For years you've taken care of other people and put yourself last. Let me help with this. You deserve it. Okay?"

He swallowed hard over the lump in his throat. "Okay."

"Okay." She nodded decisively. Then she lowered her voice. "And you and Isaac are good? You seem to be, what with all the mooning during dinner." She elbowed him playfully.

His cheeks flushed. "Yes. We're good. We're wonderful."

"Excellent. I missed you boys."

"Wasn't it nice to have your house to yourself again? Minus Aaron, of course."

"As much as I enjoy my alone time sometimes, I really did miss having you there. When I married Aaron, I knew one day his siblings might come and stay. It's been the best of both worlds. I know you're grownups, but I kind of get to practice parenting without changing diapers."

David laughed. "But you're a doctor. Aren't you used to all that… mess?"

"Sure, but it doesn't make it any less stinky." Her smile faded, and she pressed her lips together with a sigh. "And I saw Clark the other day." Jen picked up a pot and scrubbed. "He's genuinely sorry for what he did. I know when he's bullshitting, and he really does feel like shit."

"I know. I…I told him I forgave him. But I'm not sure I really want to hang out with him. Not for a while, at least. I don't think Isaac will either."

"I hear you." Bubbles sloshed over the side of the pot as she scrubbed. "He knows Aaron and I are pissed." She sighed and brushed her hair from her eyes. "Clark's my brother. Not biologically, but in all the ways that count. He's been there for me since we were kids, and I love him. Aaron and I trusted him with you and Isaac, and it hurts

that he betrayed that trust. It's going to take some time. There's no excuse for what he did, and to his credit, he isn't trying to give any."

"Sometimes our family disappoint us, but we still love them. We all make mistakes. What matters is how we deal with them afterwards."

She cocked her head and gave him a long look. "That's very wise, David Lantz."

He chuckled. "Well, I've made a bunch of mistakes, so I would know."

From the living room, Aaron called, "*Jeopardy*'s starting!"

Jen turned the pot over on the side of the sink and led the way out of the kitchen. "Excellent. I always kick Aaron's ass on the Potent Potables."

Aaron grinned. "Challenge accepted."

David settled next to Isaac on the love seat by June's front window. June was in her reclining Laz-y-Boy chair, and Jen swung her feet up onto Aaron's lap on the couch. Aaron relaxed back against the cushions, the tightness in his jaw and shoulders leeching away for the time being as Jen held his hand and teased.

Outside a brisk wind rattled the eaves trough, and David made a mental note to climb up and check it in the morning. He curled his feet up on the soft cushions, and he and Isaac leaned into each other as the game started. David hardly knew any of the answers, but as he listened to laughter and chatter fill the room, he didn't mind at all.

#

As they walked into Nathan's room the next morning, David could see the pain flash across Isaac's face—a tremble of his lips and widening of his eyes before he forced a smile for his brother. David wanted to take his hand, but fiddled with the zipper on his hoodie instead.

"Hi, Nathan." Isaac sat beside the bed. "How are you feeling?"

Nathan's skin was as pale as the sheets, and the dark smudges under his eyes looked almost painful. "Okay," he whispered.

David stood behind Isaac, making room for Aaron and Jen to come into the room and go the other side of the bed. Jen smiled as she sat in the other chair. She wore a thin purple sweater and dark jeans, and her long dark curls were looped into a knot. "Hey. I'm Jen. It's nice to finally meet you."

"Oh. Hi." Nathan seemed momentarily confused. "You're married to Aaron?"

"I sure am. What, you didn't expect a petite and sassy Filipina? I don't think Aaron envisioned marrying me either." She kidded easily, winking at Nathan.

His smile was wan, but seemed genuine. "I guess I didn't think

you'd look like this." Nathan raised a hand, a plastic tube stuck in the back of it. "Not that you look bad!"

Jen laughed. "It's okay. I know what you mean. I wasn't too sure my family would approve of me ending up with a strapping white dude, but Aaron's awesomeness could not be denied. They love him."

Aaron exaggerated the roll of his eyes. "As if there was ever any doubt."

Nathan laughed, and it was good to hear. David briefly squeezed Isaac's shoulder.

"We shouldn't stay long, but I wanted to meet you. You hanging in there?" Jen asked. "This sucks, huh?"

"Yeah." Nathan looked at Aaron. "But the doctor said I might get better if the bishop says it's okay."

"I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that happens." Aaron leaned down and squeezed Nathan's arm. "*Everything.*"

"I know I should just trust in God that everything will be the way it should be."

"Well, I think God gives us opportunities," Jen said. "And it's up to us decide if we take them. I'm told I can be rather persuasive. So I'm going to do everything I can to help, okay? Your parents love you very much. We all do. Everyone wants you to get better." She smiled. "It was really good to meet you. We should skedaddle before we get in trouble for having too many visitors in here. See you later, okay?"

Nathan nodded. "Okay."

David went around to take the empty seat. As Isaac asked Nathan about breakfast, David looked into the hall. From his angle he could see Jen and Aaron just outside, Jen scanning the clipboard of paper kept there in a plastic holder on the wall. Her expression was tight as she flipped the pages. She inhaled deeply and returned the clipboard to its place. Aaron lifted his eyebrows, and she took his hand and led him away.

"Right, David?" Isaac asked.

"Huh?" David refocused on Isaac and Nathan. "Sorry."

"I was just saying that I was sure Mother would bring in some shoofly pie since Nathan missed it at the frolic."

"Of course. Or I could ask my sisters to make some. They'd be happy to."

Nathan seemed to try to smile, but his face dropped as he looked back at Isaac. "You're wearing English clothes."

Isaac glanced at David before answering. "I am. I decided not to stay at home anymore. It's just not the right place for me."

"Are you staying with that nice English lady?"

"Yep. June. She's putting up David, Aaron, and Jen too." Isaac laughed, although it was clearly forced. "She's a glutton for

punishment."

Nathan peered at David. "You don't want to stay at home either? Is it because you don't like Amish clothes now?"

"It's about more than that." David tried to think of how to say it, but there was no good way. "It's because I can't be Amish now. The clothes don't matter. It's the rules, and how the things I want to do don't fit with Zebulon."

"But won't your family be sad?"

"Yes. And I wish I could make it so they weren't. But the only way to do that is join the church, and I can't make a promise to God that I know in my heart I'll break."

Nathan took this in, and looked back at Isaac. "You won't join the church either?"

Isaac shook his head. "It would be wrong. I hope God will understand. I hope you will too." Isaac took a shuddering breath. "I hope you'll forgive me."

"Of course. Even though I don't like it." Nathan licked his dry lips. "There are things I like out here in the world." He lowered his voice and nodded to the TV high in the corner. "I watched a show about police catching bad guys last night. Lots of cars blew up. Don't tell Mother and Father."

"I won't." Isaac smiled, but then tears sprang to his eyes.

"Don't cry." Nathan reached for Isaac, alarmed. "I promise I won't watch it again."

"No, no, it's not that." Isaac swallowed thickly. "You've always been a good boy, Nathan. I'm sorry I wasn't a better brother."

David longed to go hold Isaac, and tell him he was a wonderful brother, but it wasn't his place to say it. Fortunately, Nathan spoke with more strength and determination than he'd seemed capable of in his condition.

"What are you talking about? You're the best brother. You came all the way back here just for me. Even when you and Ephraim said I was too young to hear something, I could never stay mad for long. You always took care of us. Sometimes Mother and Father were so busy, and it was you who taught me to tie my shoelaces. Remember? For hours you showed me how to do the loops over and over. It took days, but you never got impatient."

"But…" Isaac shook his head.

"But nothing. Ephraim's a good big brother too, but sometimes he gets all hot-headed and says stupid things. But you always had the right thing to say."

Isaac swiped his eyes. "I sure never felt that way. And I left, and I should have known you were sick. You told me you'd gotten a nosebleed, and you were snoring so loudly, and—"

“How the heck would you have known about cancer?” Nathan glanced at David. “He’s being dumb, isn’t he?”

David smiled softly. “He is.” He caught Isaac’s gaze. “He needs to accept that there was no way he could have known. And that he did the best he could.”

Isaac dropped his head and managed to smile. “I guess you’re right.” He raised an eyebrow at David. “And you should take your own advice. We both did the best we could.”

David thought of the word Jen and Aaron used sometimes. “Touché.”

“But you have to promise something,” Nathan said.

“Anything.” Isaac nodded.

“Don’t leave again without saying goodbye.”

Isaac’s voice didn’t waver. “I promise.”

Footsteps approached in the hallway, and the authoritative sound of heavy boots made David jump to his feet. Sure enough, the Bylers appeared in the doorway, with Bishop Yoder and Deacon Stoltzfus like shadows behind them. Isaac stood too, and they waited.

Mrs. Byler ignored them, and David backed out of the way as she went to Nathan, running her hand over the remains of his hair tenderly. From the door, Mr. Byler spoke. “Is he here?”

David was confused for a moment until he realized Mr. Byler meant Aaron. Isaac nodded. “I’ll go find them. His wife is here too. Her name’s Jen.”

The Bylers shared a glance at that, but nodded. Danielle’s voice rang out from the doorway. “Okay, y’all have to have this discussion somewhere else. You can use the boardroom.” She elbowed her way past the bishop and deacon and bustled into the room. She smiled kindly at Nathan. “Time for a nap, buddy.”

David held back in the hallway as the others marched toward the room where the doctor had taken the Bylers to talk before. But Isaac glanced over his shoulder and came back, tugging David’s sleeve decisively. From the end of the hall, he saw Aaron and Jen coming their way.

Soon they were all stuffed into the room. No one seemed to want to be first to sit, so they stood around the table. It was warm and windowless, and David’s throat was dry. He, Isaac, Aaron, and Jen had ended up on the side of the table farthest from the door, so the two factions faced each other. The Bylers looked drawn and weary, as though they’d hadn’t slept at all. He supposed they hadn’t, and his heart ached for them, imagining what it would be like to not only be losing Isaac, but the fear of losing Nathan as well. Not to mention Aaron, long gone even though he stood only a few feet from them.

Aaron appeared calm, but from the corner of his eye David could

see how he clutched Jen's hand. The silence grew, and David's pulse raced. Isaac was a knot of tension beside him, and once again David longed to touch him and share the burden. It was a gray, blustery day, and the Amish men wore their black felt hats. They didn't remove them, and David couldn't tell if that was a good sign or bad. From beneath his hat brim, Deacon Stoltzfus watched David with something different in his expression. Disappointment? David waited for him to say that he didn't belong here since he wasn't family, but the deacon didn't speak.

After another painful moment, Jen cleared her throat. "Mr. and Mrs. Byler, I'm very glad to meet you. I wish it was under better circumstances."

Aaron seemed to shake out of a trance. "Yes. This is my wife, Jen. Dr. Jennifer Paculba."

The Bylers nodded stiffly, and after a long pause Mr. Byler said, "Hello."

There was silence again, and finally, Bishop Yoder spoke. "We have discussed the matter in great detail, and we have prayed for guidance."

As the bishop went quiet again, David wanted to lunge across the table and shake his skinny body until he spit it out. *Say it!*

Bishop Yoder ran a hand over his long white beard. "We believe the Lord has a reason for everything."

Practically vibrating with tension, Aaron gritted out, "There's no reason to let an innocent child die when he can be saved!"

"Let him finish," Jen said quietly.

"This once, we agree." Bishop Yoder folded his hands in front of him. "It is God's will that young Nathan receive this transplant, or you would not be a match. The procedure is permitted."

David had been holding his breath, and he, Isaac, Aaron, and Jen seemed to exhale in unison. David fought a surge of nervous, relieved laughter. Nathan would live! Or at least have the chance. He realized he was grinning, and when he glanced at Isaac, found he wasn't alone.

Aaron nodded. "Thank you. We'll go find the doctor. The oncologist is here, so he'll have more information." He nodded to his parents. "Will you come too?"

"We'll be along shortly," Mr. Byler said. "We must speak to the boys first."

David's giddy relief fizzled into dread. He and Isaac shared a glance, and David wanted to grab his hand and run. He knew he and Isaac were committed to each other and to living English, but every time someone begged them to stay he felt like it made little cracks in their window that could grow and shatter everything.

Isaac nodded to Aaron. "Go on. We're fine."

"Are you sure?" Aaron asked. "We can stay."

Jen added, "Absolutely."

Part of David wanted them to stay, but when he and Isaac shared another glance, he knew they'd be okay. They were strong enough. "We're okay."

Aaron and Jen gave them sympathetic and encouraging smiles before leaving. Strangely, Mrs. Byler followed them, and David wondered if perhaps she'd changed her mind, although her husband had already spoken for both of them. But then she returned, and his heart sank even further as Mother and Eli followed her into the little room and closed the door. Mother leaned heavily on her cane, but still no one sat. They stared at each other as a clock on the wall counted off the seconds. *Tick, tick, tick, tick…*

"It seems you are determined to go gladly into the arms of the devil." Bishop Yoder flexed his bony fingers before clasping them again. "Determined to disobey your parents and break their hearts."

Mother's gaze was locked on the cheap table, as though she couldn't bear to look at him. David took a deep breath. "We wish there was another way."

"Of course there is another way. The *only* way. The way to heaven. To live a good, humble life. An *Amish* life." The bishop's tone brooked no argument. David sighed to himself. How many times did they have to hear it? They were the same words over and over, but they'd never mean Isaac and David could stay.

"Isaac. You were always such a good boy." Mrs. Byler's eyes shifted to David. "We fear you have been led astray."

Mother tensed, and Eli stepped in. "They are both good boys. Still youngies." He implored David and Isaac, "You must let us help you return to the fold."

"David didn't lead me astray," Isaac said. "I made my own choice. We both did. It's no one's fault."

David found himself watching the deacon, who glowered in his usual way but strangely said nothing.

"I know it hurts you, Mother." David's voice shook, and he cleared his throat. "I'm truly sorry for that, and I'm grateful to Mr. Helmuth for taking care of you and the girls now that I've chosen a different life. But nothing you or anyone says will change our minds."

"He's right. We can't stay in Zebulon, as much as we care about you all. We have to…"

"What?" Mrs. Byler's voice rose. "*What*, Isaac? What is so important that you would do this?"

"Being free!" Isaac gestured with his hands. "Being who we are."

"But *why*?"

"Because I love him!"

In the stunned silence that followed, David felt like his ears were ringing with Isaac's shout. *I must be dreaming.* But it was real. They'd tipped over the precipice, and gravity was taking over.

Chapter Fourteen

As the words left his mouth, Isaac thought his heart might explode. He was shaking all over, and his lungs constricted painfully. From the corner of his eye he could see David staring at him with mouth agape and eyes wide. *Did I really just say that? What have I done?*

He forced himself to meet David's gaze. His mind was whirling with a thousand apologies and excuses—he'd say he meant something else! He didn't know what, but…*anything*. He opened his mouth. "I…"

But then David snapped his jaw shut. With a nod, he took Isaac's hand and threaded their fingers together as they faced their parents, Bishop Yoder, and Deacon Stoltzfus, who all stared at David and Isaac's joined hands with almost identical expressions of utter bafflement.

"We love each other," David stated. His voice almost cracked, and he cleared his throat. "We know you won't accept it. But maybe you'll understand why we have to go."

Mrs. Lantz—no, Mrs. Helmuth now—stared at David. "How can you stand there and say such things? *How?* It is unnatural!" She looked to her husband, mouth open, as if he could somehow explain it. "He can't mean this!"

Mr. Helmuth shook his head sorrowfully. "It is a great sin, David."

"It's you who's done this," the deacon muttered at David. "Ruined lives, like your brother before you."

Isaac wanted to step in front of David and shield him. "That's not true."

Mrs. Helmuth seemed to collapse in on herself, the cane giving way. She would have crashed to the thin carpet if not for her husband, who bore her up with strong arms around her. "You must rest now, Miriam. No more of this. We're going home." He propelled her out the door.

Isaac watched emotions flit across his parents' faces—confusion, disgust, anger, fear. "This is why, Mother." His throat was like sandpaper, but he got the words out. "We're gay."

"Do you see what the sinful world has done?" Bishop Yoder's face went red as he began rattling off condemnations of every kind in German. "This only proves what a dangerous place it is outside Zebulon."

"Mr. and Mrs. Byler?" Dr. Tyler stood in the doorway, and all eyes swung to her. "I'm very sorry to interrupt, but Dr. Beharry and I

need to see you to discuss the procedure, and there are forms to sign. He and his team have to get back to the Mayo ASAP. Since time is of the essence, Aaron's agreed to do the harvesting with a local anesthetic instead of a general."

Without another word, Mother lowered her head and walked out. Father looked at Isaac a last time, his face creased with sadness and confusion, and turned to follow. Bishop Yoder opened his mouth, but David held up his hand.

"No. We don't have to listen to another word. We know what you're going to say. We've said it all to ourselves already."

"It is an abomination!" Deacon Stoltzfus exclaimed. "You need the church now more than ever. The evil world has corrupted you."

Isaac gripped David's hand so tightly it would likely leave marks, but David's blunt nails dug into the back of Isaac's hand as well. "We were like this before we left. All the world did was accept us the way we are."

The bishop shook his head sadly. "We will pray for you. For the Lord to cleanse you of this sickness." He turned and left, and after a long moment staring at David, the deacon trailed behind.

The door was open, and the sounds of the hospital filtered in as Isaac and David stood there, still clutching each other's hand. Shoes squeaking on the floor. The *ding* and slide of the elevator doors. A doctor being paged, and a telephone buzzing.

"Oh my God," Isaac whispered. He laughed slightly hysterically. "What did I do?" His laughter vanished as he turned to David, squeezing his fingers. "I'm sorry. I should never have—not without both of us deciding it." David was dazed and staring at the empty doorway, and his chest rose and fell quickly. Isaac's gut churned as he thought of the panic attacks David had kept secret from him. "David? Are you okay?"

"Yes," he replied.

Isaac could tell it was an automatic response, and he cupped David's cheek and stepped in front of him. "Don't say that if it's not true. Tell me how you really feel. Look at me. Please."

Blinking, David sucked in a deep breath and focused on Isaac. "It's all right." He pulled Isaac close and wrapped his arms around him. "We're all right," he murmured. "We're still here."

"We lived." It seemed silly to say, but it was how Isaac felt. *They know the truth, and it didn't kill us.*

Isaac hugged him back tightly, pressing his face into David's neck. He felt warm and safe, and he tried to hold on to that feeling as thoughts tumbled through his mind. "I can't believe this is real."

David turned his head and kissed the shell of Isaac's ear. "But we'll get through it."

“I can’t believe that just happened.” He was repeating himself, but it was all he could do. Isaac lifted his head. “I’m so sorry. I said it before I could stop myself.”

“Shh.” David kissed him and leaned their foreheads together. “It’s done.”

“But I’d understand if you were mad at me.”

“I’m not.” David’s breath ghosted over Isaac’s lips. “I’m glad you said it.”

“You are?” Isaac whispered.

“It was time.”

Isaac’s heart skipped all around like kids playing hopscotch. “It was, wasn’t it?”

David took Isaac’s face in his hands. “I love you. I’m happy they know what’s in my heart. Even if it means we lose them. We already had anyway.”

“Isaac? David?” Aaron appeared in the doorway. He raised his hands to the side, palms up. “What the hell happened? Mom and Dad look like they swallowed razor blades.”

“We told them,” Isaac said.

“Told them what?” Aaron’s eyes went wide. “Holy shit—you came out?”

They nodded, and for a moment Isaac held his breath, wondering if perhaps Aaron would be angry about the timing. But Aaron laughed joyfully as he rushed around the table and hauled them both into a hug. Isaac was afraid he’d start crying again as he relaxed against David and his brother.

“I’m so proud of you guys.” Aaron squeezed them tightly. “I know how hard that must have been.”

“It was, but…I can’t breathe,” Isaac muttered.

“Sorry!” Aaron let them go, still smiling.

Isaac laughed too, and he reached for David’s hand. “It was hard, but it was time.”

“I may not be religious anymore, but amen.” Aaron took a deep breath. “All right, I’ve got to get ready for the procedure. We need to get Nathan better, and then we can go home. Sound good?”

“Sounds great,” Isaac agreed.

David asked, “How long—”

Mother’s shriek echoed in the corridor, a breathy cry of “*Samuel*!”

With a shared glance, they all rushed out, and Isaac almost tripped over his own feet as he raced toward Nathan’s room. Inside, Nathan was gone, but Isaac’s father was kneeling on the floor with Mother hovering behind him.

Jen crouched in front of Father, her fingers pressed to his neck. She barked, “Aaron, help me get him into the chair. David, go to the

nurses' station and tell them we need to get him down to the ER, stat."

As David whirled around, Danielle appeared. "Everything okay in here?"

Father tried to shake off Aaron and Jen. "I'm fine," he wheezed.

Jen rattled off something medical to Danielle that Isaac didn't understand, and Danielle picked up a phone to relay it. Aaron had a hold of their father, and was heaving him into a chair that Mother pushed forward. Isaac only stood there, useless. David reached for him, but Isaac sidestepped. He'd told his parents the truth, and now Father looked as if his head was going to explode. His face was beet red and he gasped for air. *Did I do this?*

"Stop!" Father bellowed, sounding stronger. "It's nothing. Let me up. I was simply dizzy for a moment."

"Yes, it's likely just stress, but you need to let the doctors run some tests to be sure." Jen held Father's shoulders firmly when he tried to stand. "Just relax and breathe."

An orderly arrived with a wheelchair, and Father shook his head vigorously. "I am perfectly fine," he gritted out.

"Samuel, let them do their tests." Mother pressed her lips together. "Please."

He sat motionless for a few moments, and then with a weary sigh, he moved into the wheelchair. Danielle pushed him out, shooting Isaac a sympathetic smile on her way past. His hands trembling, Isaac stepped toward Mother. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to…"

"It's not your fault, Isaac," Aaron assured him.

Jen squeezed Isaac's shoulder. "Of course not. It's been a stressful time. Mrs. Byler, you look as though you could use a rest too. Or some coffee, at least."

Mother shook her head. "I need to be here when Nathan gets back from his test." She pulled the chair next to the bed and dropped into it wearily. "But I will sit." She met Jen's gaze. "Thank you for your help."

Dr. Tyler and someone Isaac assumed was Dr. Beharry strode in. Dr. Tyler took in the scene with a raised eyebrow. "Everything all right here? Aaron, we're ready for you."

"Coming. Mom…" Aaron looked at her, but she kept her gaze on the rumpled sheets of Nathan's empty bed. "It's going to be all right." He went to her and knelt by her feet. "Please look at me. I want to help you. Mom…" Aaron gently touched her arm.

But she didn't waver, keeping her gaze distant and her hands clenched in her lap. His face crumpling, Aaron pushed to his feet and left with the doctors. Isaac's heart sank, and he couldn't remember ever being more disappointed in his mother. It seemed that no matter what he said, and no matter how much turmoil she felt, she'd do

everything to keep her mask in place.

Jen was halfway out the door when she stopped and strode back in. “Mrs. Byler, I know this has been a trying time. I know you’re scared, and tired, and that I’m probably the last person you want to talk to right now. Or possibly ever. But that’s your son that just walked out of here. Your son, who you raised, and who loves you, and who is in pain. I don’t mean physical pain, although that’s coming shortly. Do you know what it’s like donating stem cells with a local anesthetic? It’s pretty close to torture.”

Isaac and David shared a worried glance. Isaac hated to think of Aaron in pain. “Isn’t there another way that won’t hurt?” he asked.

“There’s no time. And Aaron doesn’t care. He’d hack off his arm with a rusty saw for his brother even though he barely knows Nathan. Because that’s the kind of man he is. Good, and kind, and loving. The kind of man *you* raised, Mrs. Byler. When we got married, he made sure we had a couple of spare rooms in our house in case one of his brothers or sisters ever needed to stay. And you may think that’s a bad thing because everyone should stay Amish, but Aaron never tried to entice any of your other children to join him.”

“That’s true.” Isaac’s voice sounded distant to his own ears. “He never did. I found him. He didn’t find me.” Mother flinched at this, but said nothing.

“Aaron’s the best person I’ve ever known, and I thank God every day that I didn’t let our differences keep us apart. And I hate seeing him hurt. I hate it so much. I know you must too, Mrs. Byler. You must hate seeing any of your children suffering. So I hope the next time Aaron talks to you, you can at least *look* at him. I don’t think that’s too much to ask.” With that, she spun on her heel and was gone.

Part of Isaac wanted to follow Jen and leave his mother to her misery. Turn his back on her the way she did Aaron.

But she was still his mother.

Despite everything, he still had to try to get through to her. His throat was so dry he wasn’t sure he’d be able to talk, but he got the words out. “Can I stay here with you for a little while?”

Mother didn’t meet his gaze, but she nodded once, a jerk of her head.

David backed toward the door. “I’ll just…” He smiled encouragingly at Isaac and disappeared.

Isaac wanted to call after him and ask him to stay, but seeing them together now would be too much for his mother. As much as it hurt, he knew the truth about their relationship was an enormous shock to her. Tentatively, he took the chair across the bed and watched as she straightened the sheets and made the bed with efficient movements, tucking and tightening the blankets even though

Nathan would be back soon from his X-ray or MRI or whatever machine they were using to poke and prod him today.

The silence was a heavy cloak over them, and Isaac's knee bounced as he jiggled his leg. He reached into his pocket, but realized he'd tucked the knife safely in his suitcase. He wanted to say everything and nothing at all. His stomach churned as he thought of Father. *What if he has a heart attack because of me? What if he dies? What if—*

"Do you still pray?"

Mother's voice was so low Isaac almost didn't hear the question. He stopped fidgeting and clasped his hands in his lap. He didn't pray nearly as much as he should, but he was able to honestly say, "Yes."

"Will you pray with me?"

Isaac wanted to leap across the bed and hold her tight and beg her to still love him. "Yes, Mother. Always."

She bowed her head, and although her prayer was silent, Isaac could well imagine her plea to God. He bowed his head and made his own.

#

Aaron whimpered, and Isaac wished he could do more than murmur sympathetic things and give him water. Across the bed, Jen squeezed Aaron's hand.

"The painkillers will kick in soon, babe. You were a rock star in there today."

Aaron tried to laugh. "Thanks." His voice was hoarse. "Not gonna lie—getting stem cells drilled out of your hips doesn't tickle."

Beside Isaac, David cleared his throat. "I thought they were giving you something so you wouldn't feel it?"

Jen answered, "He was frozen from the waist down during the harvesting, but it's sore as hell as the anesthetic fades." She brushed back his hair tenderly.

"Feels like an MMA fighter was using my lower back as a punching bag." Aaron shifted gingerly in the bed. "Are you sure Dad's okay?"

"Uh-huh." Isaac fiddled with the edge of the sheet hanging over the side of the bed. "They said he passed all the tests. I guess he just freaked out because of me."

"It's not your fault." Jen gave him a stern look. "You didn't do anything wrong. In fact, I think you did a very brave thing." She kissed Aaron's hand. "The Byler brothers knocked it out of the park today. As sucky as it is for your parents, the truth will set you free."

Isaac had heard someone else say that on a TV show or in a movie, but he couldn't remember which one. David nudged his knee with his own, and Isaac pressed back against him. "I hope so."

"You guys should go have dinner, or at least a late lunch," Aaron said. "I'm fine."

But the three of them shook their heads. The thought of eating made Isaac want to throw up.

Dr. Beharry knocked on the half-open door as he came in. His teeth were very white as he smiled, and his accent had a sing-song quality that Isaac liked to hear. "How are you feeling, Aaron?" His dark hair was streaked with gray at the temples, and Isaac tried to think of the word Jen had used to describe it. *Distinguished.*

"Great." Aaron's smile was more of a wince. "Well, I've been better."

Dr. Beharry chuckled. "No need to put on a brave face. Harvesting is rarely easy, and certainly not under these rushed circumstances." He glanced at the chart in his hand. "Aaron, we think it's best for you to stay in overnight."

Frowning, Jen stood and reached for the clipboard. "How are his levels?"

"Not bad. Not the best." Dr. Beharry gave her the chart, and they *hmm-ed* over it and spoke in big medical words.

"Anything I should know?" Aaron asked. He was clearly trying for a light tone, but didn't quite make it as he grimaced.

"Nothing to worry your pretty little head over," Jen answered. "You just need some good rest." She smiled at Dr. Beharry. "Thank you again for bringing your team and equipment from Rochester. We're so grateful. I know the Bylers are as well, even if they might not be so…effusive."

"Of course, of course. This isn't an ordinary case, so extraordinary measures are called for. Nathan is finishing his last round of chemo and radiation, and then we'll give him Aaron's cells."

Isaac didn't want to ask, but he had to. "Do you think he'll live?" David reached for his hand, and Isaac took it gratefully.

"I'll do everything in my power to help Nathan get better. And Aaron has given him a fighting chance." He glanced behind as footsteps approached, and stepped aside as Father walked in. Dr. Beharry smiled. "I was just saying that Aaron has given Nathan a real chance at recovery. Now I'll give you some privacy." He pulled the door shut behind him.

Father wasn't wearing his hat, and the lines on his face seemed deeper than usual. His gaze locked on Isaac and David holding hands, and David jumped to his feet. "I'll just…June's coming to take me to see my mother. I have my phone."

"Okay." Isaac could feel the weight of Father's stare. "See you later tonight." David edged around Isaac's father, giving him as wide a berth as possible. Isaac wanted to call him back, but it would be

selfish.

Jen cleared her throat. “How are you feeling, Mr. Byler?”

“Fine. Thank you. It was only stress. But I appreciate your help earlier. I apologize for my rudeness.”

“Apology accepted. But before you say more, your son’s been through an incredibly painful procedure, and he needs his rest. Not a haranguing.”

“Jen, it’s okay. I’m okay,” Aaron insisted.

“No you’re not. You’ve been through enough today.” She sighed. “I’ll go check on Nathan, but I won’t be long.” She bent and kissed Aaron. “Just remember you’re a rock star.”

When she was gone, Father stood at the foot of Aaron’s bed, and Isaac still perched on the edge of his chair. Father stroked his beard, and it was such a familiar gesture that Isaac had to swallow a sudden lump in his throat. He barely breathed as the silence stretched out. Aaron was pale, and with his hair mussed over his forehead, he looked younger and small in the bed.

“Are you in very much pain?” Father asked quietly. He kept his gaze on the foot of Aaron’s bed.

“I can handle it. It’s worth it to help Nathan.”

“We will need to discuss the cost. I—”

“Don’t worry about the money. I have good insurance. You’ll have more than enough medical bills to cover, even with Dr. Beharry helping pro bono.”

Father stood there with his arms at his sides, looking so much older than Isaac had ever seen him.

Aaron’s mouth tightened. “If you just came about the money, then you can go. Don’t worry about it. Don’t worry about me. I’ve got it covered.”

Father’s shoulders hitched as he took a jagged breath with his chin toward his chest. “But I do worry.”

Isaac and Aaron looked at each other, and then back at Father. Isaac wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. He was almost afraid to speak. “Father?”

Father raised his head, and Isaac’s breath caught. He and Aaron watched with wonder as an actual tear slipped down Father’s cheek. In all his years, Isaac had never seen his father cry. His pulse galloped.

“When one of our own is shunned, we are instructed to cut them out of our lives. Out of our hearts. I should not speak to you now, or ever until you have returned to the church to repent. I have tried to do my duty to the Lord. I have tried to obey the Ordnung’s edicts.”

Aaron briefly looked to Isaac with wide eyes. “I…I know. I know that’s the way they say it has to be.”

“I have tried to do what’s right, even when my heart grew

unbearably heavy. All these years I've refused to say your name. You were my first-born son. How it has grieved me, my Aaron."

Aaron burst into tears. "*Dad*."

"You are a good man. A good brother." Father's lips trembled. "I can see that now."

Isaac could hardly believe his ears. He'd wanted to hear these words for so long, through all the years when Aaron had vanished from their lives. He'd ached for their parents to acknowledge the loss. Aaron choked down a sob, and Isaac grasped his cold hand.

Father went on. "I shall always pray for you to return to us and the Lord. That will never change. But I am proud of you, my son."

Aaron smiled through his tears. "Thank you."

Isaac blinked rapidly, still frozen on the edge of his seat, waiting for Father to say something—anything—to him. *Please love me still.*

Father's gaze swung to him. "Isaac…" His voice broke.

"Father, I…" There was too much to say, and he didn't know where to begin.

After a long silence, Father spoke again. "This is not the way it should be. We cannot understand how the world has corrupted you in such a short time."

It was like a punch that knocked the air from him. For a terrible moment, jealousy pierced him. *You're proud of Aaron but not me?* He wanted to curl up and disappear.

But Aaron was squeezing his hand and speaking up, defending him as always. "You're wrong, Dad. Isaac's not corrupted." He grew fierce, even though his face contorted with pain as he tried to push himself up. "Isaac hasn't done anything wrong. There's nothing wrong with him. If you could just see—" He bit back a cry, flopping back onto the pillows.

Isaac grabbed the cup of water and held it to Aaron's lips. Somehow he spoke calmly. "It's okay. Don't say anything else. You need to rest." He licked his lips, wishing he had some water himself. He stood and faced his father. He prayed to God for strength, and took a deep breath. "It wasn't the world that made me this way. I was always like this."

Father's eyes widened, and his lips parted. "That…that cannot be true. You were never…*this* way."

"I was, Father. Always. I denied for years. But it's why I was never interested in girls or dating. I was always different. You know I was. Deep down you know it."

Father stared with red-rimmed eyes. "Different, yes. Special. But not…*that*. Such a terrible sin, Isaac."

"I know you think it is. But it's the way I've always been." With each word, he felt stronger. "David's the same way, and we both tried

to deny it. You know he tried. He almost joined the church."

"He has warped your mind. He has you believing this." Father looked to Aaron. "Can you really condone this?"

"Yes. I love Isaac just the way he is. I always have, and I always will."

"The way he is," Father echoed dully.

Isaac spoke again. "This is the way God made me."

Father jerked as if he'd struck him. "Oh, Isaac. To even think such a thing." His eyes shone, and fresh tears spilled into his beard. "You break our hearts."

"It took me a long time to accept it. But now I do. Now I'm not ashamed. I'm not ashamed to love."

Father wiped at his eyes and clasped his hands behind his back. "If you return to us, and to the church, you will be able to put this behind you. We will help you live a good life as a man should. For it is the only way to heaven."

"No. I don't believe it is."

Father sighed heavily. "Then I suppose there is nothing else to say." He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, the stoic facade locked back in place and his tears drying. He turned, his steps heavy as he left them. But at the door, he stopped. He didn't face them. "Isaac…I can never accept this sin. But you will always be in my heart. I will pray for you, my sons." Then he was gone.

Isaac pulled the chair right up to the mattress and bent over, leaning his head next to Aaron's. He wanted to climb into the bed and have Aaron whisper stories to him the way he used to in the moonlight. He wanted Aaron to tell him everything would be okay.

"Isaac…" Aaron grimaced, the circles under his eyes dark smudges and his face pale.

"I'm okay." Isaac kept his voice steady. "You need to rest now."

"But…"

"Rest now."

When Aaron bit his lip to try and stop his tears, Isaac gave him more water and told him one of his favorite old tales, speaking softly until the afternoon waned and his brother was finally asleep.

Chapter Fifteen

David listened to the rumble of June's truck fade as he walked up the drive toward Eli's house. The sun was setting, and lamplight glowed from the windows. But this time it didn't feel like coming home, and not only because he was in his jeans and spring jacket. Although he'd known that he'd never live in Zebulon again, he found himself missing the townhouse in San Francisco and the bedroom he shared with Isaac, even if he didn't miss the noise and grime of the city.

Anna darted out of the house as he approached, the strings of her white cap trailing behind her in the cool evening breeze as she raced over. "What happened? Mother went right to bed this afternoon and has been up there all day. I went to check on her and she was staring at the ceiling. She wouldn't even look at me. Eli says it isn't Nathan, so it must be about you." She tugged his arm and led him around the wash house.

Although he knew it couldn't be avoided, the thought of his mother so hurt because of him made David's chest twinge. "Yes. We told them all. The truth about me and Isaac."

Anna's jaw dropped. "Wow. I guess that went about as well as expected."

David was about to answer when Mary's voice wisped into the night air from behind him, hardly loud enough to hear. "What about you and Isaac?"

As Anna's eyes widened, David turned to find Mary coming around the corner of the wash house, dark sodden material in her hands. Anna said, "I thought you were—"

"Sarah broke a jar of beets, remember? I washed her dress so it wouldn't stain." Mary's voice was still calm, but unnervingly so. "What truth?"

"Oh, Mary. It's all right." Anna reached for her. "I'll hang Sarah's dress. Go on in, and I'll come brush your hair."

That had always been a little indulgence Mary had loved, and Anna's favorite way of apologizing to her sister when she'd teased her too much or upset her. David could imagine them now in his mind sitting on the floor by the stove in the living room, Mary's eyes closed as Anna patiently brushed out her golden hair, the *snick* of the brush on each stroke soothing to all of them.

"No." Mary's lower lip wavered, but her tone was firm. "Tell me." She looked to him. "David, please tell me."

His heart thumped so hard he was sure the girls would hear it. *I*

can't. I can't tell her. But he knew the time had come. He wished Isaac was there to blurt it out as he had earlier, and he wondered if perhaps Anna would do it for him now. But she was quiet beside him aside from the sound of her quick breaths.

"I don't want to hurt you." It was the truth, even though he knew he would. Oh, how he would hurt her.

"What is it?" Mary whispered.

It was like he was physically pushing the words out, and he shook with the strain. "I love Isaac. We're together, Mary."

Still clutching the wet dress, she stood motionless. Her gaze shifted to Anna, and then back to David. "I don't understand."

"The English call it being gay. When two men love each other, or two women. Homosexual. That's what I am. That's what Isaac is. It's why we had to leave. Why we can never live here again. Why we can't be Amish."

"Gay," Mary echoed. "You and Isaac…you *love* him?"

He felt like he had gravel stuck in his throat. "I do."

The moon was rising, and it was bright enough that he could see the wetness glistening in Mary's eyes as her brows knit together. "Isaac…loves you?"

"Yes. We…he's my boyfriend."

"But that's not how it works." Mary looked to Anna again. "It's not how it's supposed to be."

"Some people are different," Anna said. "They're just born that way. The preachers will say otherwise, that it's wrong and evil, but you know David is good. Isaac too." She reached for Mary's hands, but Mary jerked back.

"You knew?"

Anna shook her head, but told the truth. "I found out before they left. I overheard something. I wanted to tell you, but it wasn't my place."

Mary's face crumpled. "All those nights I talked to you about Isaac. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm sorry!" Anna cried now too. "I wanted to. But it wasn't mine to tell."

Mary swung her gaze back to David. "Why didn't you tell me, then?"

"I wanted to. But I was afraid, Mary. I was afraid of so many things. Please forgive me." David wanted to hold her close as he had the other night and wipe all her tears away.

Her shoulders quaked. "All this time. You must have thought I was so stupid. So stupid!"

"No!" David and Anna shouted in unison. David shook his head. "Never. You're good and kind, and I never wanted to hurt you."

Footsteps approached, and Mary swiped at her cheeks with jerky motions as Eli rounded the wash house. He stared at them, and then heaved a sigh. “David, I think it’s best you go. Your mother needs to rest. This has all been too much for her.”

“I just want to tell her…” He trailed off.

“What could you say now?”

“I…I just want her to understand.”

Eli shook his head wearily. “This is a thing you cannot have, David.”

David’s shoulders sagged. It was true. He wanted to argue—wanted to stay and plead and make them understand, but this was an impossible thing. He could have Isaac, and he could have freedom. But he couldn’t have this as well.

“Your mother’s heart is broken.” Eli looked at Mary. “All of our hearts. Come now, the girls are waiting for dinner.” He wrapped an arm around Mary and led her back toward the house.

Anna wiped her eyes. “He’s right that Mother can’t deal right now. I don’t know if there’s anything you could ever say. I’ll try to get Mary to understand, though. I think she will eventually.” She rolled her lips inward, and her voice was uneven. “She wouldn’t hurt a fly. She’s always been so good. Not like me. God, David. She’s going to hate me when I leave too.”

He opened his arms and she went to him, sniffling against his chest, her cap askew. She smelled like flour and cinnamon, and David rubbed her back, murmuring nothing words. Anna was usually so unflappable, but in that moment he remembered just how young she was. He wanted to protect her from all the pain he knew was coming, but he couldn’t. “It’ll be okay. It won’t be easy, but I’ll help you.”

“I wish I could live the life I want without hurting them,” she whispered. “I need freedom. I just…I’ll never be able to follow all the rules here, so if I’m going to hell I might as well make it worth my while.”

He kissed her head. “The English have a saying for that. ‘Go big or go home.’ It fits you, my Anna.”

She laughed softly. “It does, I think.” Straightening up, she sighed wistfully. “I wish I could go with you right now.”

“You could. We’d made it work. I won’t leave you behind if you want to come now.”

Anna brushed the front of his jacket where her tears must have left a spot. “I can’t go yet. I need to give them some time. And there’s Ephraim.”

David raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were just friends?”

She huffed. “That was the plan. But…I don’t know. Nothing’s happened, and it’s stupid to do anything. I don’t know if Ephraim will

ever really want to leave. He was determined to leave Zebulon, but now with Nathan, I'm not so sure. He's different lately. Not so angry."

"What does he say about it?"

"I don't think he knows. Obviously he can't leave until Nathan's well or…until it's resolved one way or the other. But I'll be eighteen in June. I guess I'll see how I feel then. I want to make sure it's the right time. Emma wrote from Red Hills and said that Samuel Lapp—you remember, Abraham's Samuel with the red hair? Well, he just came home for the fourth time."

"How is Emma doing?" David barely remembered their older sister after all these years.

"Fine. Having babies and mending torn shirts. She got a great deal on jars for canning in the fall. You know, the usual thrills." Anna smiled. "But she's happy."

"I'm glad. Too bad about Samuel."

"Yeah. He's been running away and going back for three years. When I leave, I want it to be for good. I want it to be right."

David smiled and straightened her cap. "How did you get to be so smart? I wish I'd known my mind half as well at your age."

"I had a brave brother to look up to."

He scoffed. "Me? I've been terrified for almost as long as I can remember."

"But not anymore." She squeezed his hand. "I can tell things have changed. You've changed. In a good way. You always took care of us, and I hope now you can take care of yourself. And Isaac. Your new family."

"Anna!" Eli's voice rang out sharply from the direction of the house.

"You should go. I don't think I'll come back here before we leave. I'm going to go to the barn to say goodbye to Kaffi."

Nodding, she backed up. "I'll sneak over to June's tomorrow or the next day." She smiled tremulously. "Be happy, David. You've earned it."

When she was gone, David leaned against the rough, worn planks of the wash house and closed his eyes. The odd cricket chirped, and as the trees tentatively bloomed, the air was rich and damp and a little sweet. He couldn't hear a single engine, or anything but the ripple of new grass.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed. He read the message from Isaac eagerly.

Are you still at Eli's? Jen and I can come get you. We're leaving the hospital pretty soon.

He quickly tapped out that he would be in the barn, pleased that his thumbs seemed to be cooperating at least a little better; he only

had to go back and fix one word this time. The phone seemed to want to make changes on its own and write down words he didn't type, which he didn't understand.

In the barn, David lit a lantern and hunted for the stash of carrots he knew had to be in there. Perhaps he should have asked Eli first, but surely Eli wouldn't mind him giving his old horse a treat. Kaffi whinnied softly as he approached, and affection swelled in David.

"Hey, boy." He stroked Kaffi's head. "I wish I could take you with me."

Kaffi's ear twitched and he butted David with his nose. When David held out the carrot, Kaffi took a huge bite. Yes, one day David wanted this. Maybe a piece of land where he could build a barn to house his workshop and a few animals. The thought of working that way again filled him with a warm sense of peace.

He gazed around the barn, which was similar enough to his old one. David went to the lantern and traced the loop of the metal handle, breathing in the faint whiff of gas. Wood creaked under his sneakers, and the smell of hay and horse hung over everything as if it was a filmy layer of grease he could run his finger through. It was so achingly familiar, and for a moment he didn't want to leave.

But this time he would do it properly. When he and Isaac had bolted the first time, there had barely been time to scrawl a note to his mother. Now, even though Eli Helmuth's farm hadn't been his home, he could take his time and soak in the little pieces of Amish life around him. Eli's tools hung from hooks on the wall in the corner, and David touched them reverently. There was a little table there, one of its legs splintered. David crouched down to examine it.

Soon he'd hung up his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his plaid shirt as he sanded a new piece of wood that had been set by the table, clearly for a new leg. Eli had a small worktable set up, and David leaned over it. The dampness in the air outside had turned to rain, and it poured in a steady drone beyond the open barn door. As he fashioned the new leg, he hummed to himself. He wasn't sure what the song was—something English. He worked as the rain fell, the rush of it like a lullaby, blocking out everything else.

When the door creaked, David saw movement from the corner of his eye as he leaned in and carefully put a screw to the new leg. "I didn't hear the car. Say, what is this song?" He hummed it again. "Oh, is it from that show on TV? With the questions and the man named Alex?"

When Isaac didn't answer, David looked over. The peace evaporated, and his heart skipped a beat as he stared at Deacon Stoltzfus standing inside the doorway, rain dripping from his felt hat. David forced a smile. "Deacon. Hello. I was just—"

“I know what you’re doing.” The deacon’s voice was as flat as his expression.

“The table was broken.” He held up the new leg awkwardly.

Standing completely still, the deacon watched him. The rain still fell, blocking out the world beyond the barn.

“I should go. I suppose Eli can finish this.” David carefully put down the table leg. “I’m leaving, and I won’t be back this time. I think we can agree it’s best for everyone that way.”

“You think it’s best to turn away from the Lord?”

David bit back a sigh. Another lecture was the last thing he needed. “It’s the way it has to be.”

“You could have been saved.”

“I appreciate your concern, Deacon. I truly do. But I have to go.”

“Isaac Byler could have been saved.”

Defensiveness flared through David. “Don’t talk about Isaac.”

Deacon Stoltzfus stepped closer. “You ruined him, just as your brother did my Martha.”

Memories of Joshua and familiar guilt sank through him. “I…” There was no sense in arguing—the deacon would never understand.

“You were right.”

He took this in, waiting for the deacon to say more.

“You look like him. The same hair. Same eyes. You stand the same way. Sometimes I’d see you from the corner of my eye and think it was him. Think maybe I’d see my Martha too.”

David could only imagine the pain of losing a child. “I’m sorry. I wish I could change it.”

“I knew you were just like him. A rot. A cancer.” He clenched his fists. “I could see it in you all along.”

The hair on David’s neck stood up. “Then it’s best if I go.”

The deacon’s face creased. “When you ran from church, I thought I’d been right all along. But then you returned, and I saw that God had given you another chance. I prayed, and I realized it wasn’t too late. That if you could come back and join the church, it wouldn’t be for nothing. There would still be hope. You could be saved.”

“I…I wish I could.”

“Wishes are for children and fools.” He wheezed, a kind of laugh, and his eyes were intent. “And I’m the biggest fool of them all. I thought you were different after all. I wanted you to be different.”

“Deacon…” He wished he could help the man’s pain.

The deacon kept talking as if David hadn’t spoken. “Isaac was an innocent. Just like my Martha. She should never have been out that night. She was supposed to be in bed.”

“I’m sorry.” David shook his head. “I wish I could change it. I wish she hadn’t died. I wish none of them had. But this isn’t the same.

I should go." He went to the wall for his jacket, and when he turned back, the deacon had closed the distance between them. David sidestepped toward Kaffi's stall, and when the deacon came closer still with his wild gaze, David tripped backwards, landing on his backside on the hay-strewn boards.

Deacon Stoltzfus loomed over him. Lifting his hand, he stared at his meaty, trembling fingers. He drew his fingers into a fist before flattening them out again, watching as if he'd never seen his hand before and wasn't sure what it was doing on the end of his arm. Water dripped from the end of his nose, falling into his long beard. A voice in the back of his mind ordered David to get up, but his limbs didn't seem to want to cooperate.

"I want to strike you." His voice was eerily calm. "That is not our way, but I feel it all the same. Coursing through me. Hatred. I hate your brother. For years I've tried to deny it. Bury it deep down. But I can't. I hate him. I hate him for taking my sweet girl away."

David stared up at him. He kept his voice low. "It's all right, Deacon. I understand. I don't blame you."

The deacon still stared as his own hand. "It was supposed to be different here. We founded Zebulon to keep the sin out. To protect our children. So my Martha didn't die for nothing."

"David?" Isaac's voice rose sharply. "David!" He raced toward them, stopping a few feet away. Isaac stared at David sprawled on the floor, and then at the deacon. "Did you…did you *hurt* him?"

"No." David got to his feet. "I tripped. That's all." He edged around the deacon and kept Isaac safely behind him.

But Deacon Stoltzfus made no move toward Isaac. He lowered his arm with a slap against his wet coat.

Isaac whispered, "David? What's happening?"

"It's okay," he muttered. "We're going now."

Bishop Yoder and Eli came into the barn. The deacon was still standing like a statue, the tremor in his body the only movement he made. He blinked at them, dazed. "He said he'd pray. Not right. A sinner. Martha wasn't. But he's like his brother after all. Unclean. A sinner of the world." Deacon Stoltzfus shook his head, muttering almost to himself. "We've worked so hard to make Zebulon holy and pure. A better place."

Bishop Yoder stepped closer, his eyes darting from Isaac and David to Deacon Stoltzfus. "We have, Jeremiah. This is a better place."

"He ruined it."

The bishop spoke gruffly. "Jeremiah, we forgave Joshua his sins, and—"

"No!" Deacon Stoltzfus's shout echoed in the rafters, and a nesting bird flapped its wings high above. "I tried. But I don't forgive. I can't. I

was supposed to swallow my anger and forgive all, but it has only grown stronger inside me. Grown into hatred. I choke on it each day."

David spoke quietly. "I'm sorry for what my brother did. For your loss."

Now Deacon Stoltzfus focused on David and Isaac again. "And now you are doing the same. Isaac Byler was a good boy. And you might as well have killed him. He will be lost to his family just as my Martha was. As Rachel was." His heavy brow creased. "It was supposed to be different here. It was supposed to be better."

"Come now, Jeremiah." Bishop Yoder's tone brooked no argument. "This is not our way. We must forgive, and pray for our troubled youngies." He turned to David and Isaac. "If you show true repentance, we will always forgive and welcome you in Zebulon once more. Find the Lord in your hearts. Be obedient and turn away from this sin. We pray you will find your way home."

Bishop Yoder turned away, and the deacon shuffled after him with his head low. David wished there was something he could say to make it better, knowing he never could.

His face creased with sadness, Eli said, "I don't think you should come back, David. Not unless you change your path. I will pray for you."

Isaac took David's hand. "Jen's waiting in the car."

David followed him from the barn. *This is it. I'm really leaving. This is the end.* David waited for the panic to hit him—for the terrible drowning sensation to seize his lungs and bring him to his knees in the muck. For the pain in his head to spread like a landslide and wash him away with terror and guilt that he was leaving his family once and for all. Yet it didn't come. He held Isaac's hand, their steps sure.

David realized Mary and Anna were outside near the house, and he could see Elizabeth, Rebecca, and sweet little Sarah with their noses pressed against the glass of the kitchen window. Mother was nowhere in sight, and he swallowed thickly over the thought that he'd already seen her for the last time.

David almost let go of Isaac's hand. But Isaac was so solid and secure at his side, and instead of shame, *pride* surged through him, and a final clarity. *This is who we are. Who we were meant to be. This really is how God made us.* He wanted to say a prayer of thanks right there.

Mary watched them with her arms wrapped around her middle, her face pale. "David."

They stopped, and David gripped Isaac's hand. "Yes?" He glanced at Anna, who watched Mary with concern.

"Don't forget us."

"Never." His eyes stung with tears.

“Be safe.” She hesitated. “Both of you.”

“Back inside now, girls.” Eli herded Mary and Anna toward the house, and Anna flashed a hopeful smile over her shoulder.

“Goodbye, Mary,” Isaac said. Then he blurted, “We’ll write to you. If you’ll let us.”

At the door, Mary glanced back. She stared for a few heartbeats, her chin wobbling. Then she nodded, and was gone.

“Eli,” David called. “Thank you. Take care of them. Please.”

Eli nodded. “Always.” He shut the door behind him.

The bishop and deacon were riding away in their buggy, and Jen stepped out of the rental car. “You guys okay?”

David took a last look, and lifted his hand to his little sisters at the window. They waved, and Sarah pressed her palm to the glass, and then her mouth. David blew her a kiss, and then blinked back his tears and turned to the car.

“We’re okay,” Isaac answered as he climbed into the backseat and tugged David in beside him, still clutching his hand. David didn’t want to let go either, and leaned against him.

Jen got behind the wheel and started the short drive to June’s. As they turned onto the road, the lights cutting the night and reflecting off the yellow stripes on the road, he wished they could drive all the way back to San Francisco now. He breathed deeply, and although he mourned leaving his family behind, he felt lighter than he could ever remember.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Isaac peered at him with concern.

“Uh-huh.”

“But you’re smiling.”

David laughed, and it felt *so good*. “I am, aren’t I? We belong together, Isaac. I don’t think we’ll go to hell for it. There is another way to heaven. Not just the Amish way. We don’t have to feel guilty ever again.”

Isaac’s lower lip trembled. Then he rolled his eyes with false bravado. “*Duh*. Glad you finally got the…what’s that word, Jen?”

“Memo.” Her voice had a smile in it.

“No more guilt,” Isaac said. “No more.”

David watched the dark countryside fly by as they made their way. Still smiling, he stole a kiss from Isaac, knowing they were finally free.

Chapter Sixteen

This is my last day in Zebulon.

Murmuring, David smacked his lips and stretched out on his belly, his arm flopping over Isaac and almost hitting him in the chin before resting across his collar bones. On his back in the morning light, Isaac chuckled to himself. The thick Amish quilt on June's guest bed, checked with red and pink and green, had slipped down to their waists in the night, but it was quite warm enough with the early sun beaming over the trees and through the window beside them. They slept naked, and Isaac had woken hard, but it had faded now.

The faint smell of coffee wafted up from downstairs, and Isaac could hear the odd murmur of breakfast conversation between Aaron, Jen, and June. He knew he should wake David to go down, but he was content to watch the rise and fall of David's back, and the way his eyelashes fluttered, his lips parted as he slept on. Isaac felt like David had months of sleep to catch up on.

We're leaving. He knew it wasn't the same as that Sunday in January that had ended on a Greyhound bus speeding into the night. At June's they weren't really in Zebulon, and more importantly—they were together. Isaac feathered the tips of his fingers across David's arm, which lay heavy and solid over him.

It had been four days since they'd come out. Four days since Isaac had spoken to his parents. He'd made sure to visit Nathan when they weren't there, and he'd been afraid they'd forbid it. But they hadn't, and he'd sat by Nathan's bed and watched game shows with him, not worrying anymore if he was a bad influence. If Nathan got the chance to grow up, he'd make his own choice when the time came.

The thought of returning to San Francisco with its hills and salty air sent excitement zipping through Isaac. It seemed like he'd been gone for months, but it wasn't even two weeks. His teachers had sent kind emails and assured him he wasn't in trouble for missing school. He'd get to see Lola, Derek, and Chris again—and this time David could meet them properly. He was going to meet David's friend Gary as well.

His eyes still closed, David moaned softly as he shifted. "Is it time to get up?"

"No." Isaac teased the dark hair on David's forearm.

His lips lifted. "Liar."

"There's no rush. Go back to sleep."

"Mmm." David blinked and smoothed his palm over Isaac's chest. "Morning."

“Morning.” He pressed a kiss to Isaac’s shoulder. “Do you think they’ll mind if we take our time this morning?”

“No. Our flight’s not until tonight, and we just need to go to the hospital before we leave. Plenty of time.”

“I wonder…no. Never mind.”

“What?” Isaac turned onto his side and looked into David’s blue eyes. “Tell me.”

David sighed and stroked Isaac’s arm. “I wonder if my mother will come today. Your parents know we’re leaving, and they surely told her and Eli.”

“Definitely. You know how quickly the rumor mills works in Zebulon. I guess we’ll find out soon enough.” He traced circles on David’s skin. “Do you want her to come?”

“Yes. No.” He shook his head. “I change my mind every minute.”

“I know. It’s strange to think this really might be the last time we see them.”

“Do you think your parents really will let Danielle email you and Aaron about how Nathan’s doing?”

“I hope so. They told her she could, and it wouldn’t be like them to go back on their word. Especially since Aaron’s bone marrow might save him. Still, I hate leaving him while he’s stuck in there.”

“He understands. We all have to get back to work, and you have school.”

Isaac hooked his leg over David’s and rubbed idly. “I have to admit I’m eager to get back. Is that bad? I should want to stay for Nathan.”

“It’s not bad. We have to get back to our own lives now. It’s time.” His eyes danced. “I’m excited, Isaac.”

Isaac grinned. “Tell me more.”

“I want to try sushi again. And go to that museum you were talking about, with the modern art. I was reading that there’s a cable car museum downtown. It’s free, and you can see how the cables work and where they go underground.”

“Really? That sounds awesome. Where did you read about that?”

David blushed a little. “On my phone. I used the Google.”

“Look at you! Using your phone for more than an expensive paperweight.”

Laughing, David tickled Isaac’s ribs. “I know, I know. I was a little slow getting used to technology. But I’m learning.”

“I’m proud of you. And yes, I want to go to the cable car museum. I want to go everywhere. With you.”

David kissed him softly. “Sorry. I haven’t brushed my teeth.”

“I don’t care.” Isaac kissed him back. “I love your morning breath.”

"That's two lies you've told this morning." David nudged Isaac's nose with his own.

They kissed lazily for another minute, mingling their stale breath until Isaac could only taste a mixture of them. He pulled back and traced David's stubbly cheek with his finger. "I hope your mother comes today. We should get to say a real goodbye this time."

David's smile faded. "I hope so."

"I'm glad our parents know the truth, but it still sucks to see them so hurt, doesn't it?"

"It does."

Isaac thought of David's poor mother, and all she'd lost. "What do you think we'd be doing right now if we stayed in Red Hills?" They'd wondered before, but the question still haunted him sometimes.

David's voice was quiet, and he stroked his palm over Isaac's hip. "We might have never really known each other. It's way bigger, so there are more carpenters. You might have gone to work for one of them."

The thought made Isaac's insides ache. "We might be marrying women if we'd never gotten to know each other. We might be married already."

"Or you'd be in love with another carpenter," David teased. "Like Daniel Eicher."

Laughing, Isaac slapped David's shoulder. "Ugh. He must be sixty by now, and I bet he still goes cross-eyed and gets chicken caught in his beard. No way. I'd rather be alone. Although it might be better than marrying a girl, I suppose."

"Maybe one day we can marry each other."

Isaac's heartbeat skipped. "We actually could in California, couldn't we?" A bubble of joy swelled in him. "I've never really thought about it. It seemed too far away."

A smile lifting his lips, David shrugged. "It still is. It'll be a few years until we're really settled. You have school, and we have to save up some money first. But then we could. We could really get married, Isaac."

Isaac found himself grinning so hard his cheeks hurt. "We will."

David beamed. "It's a deal."

We're going to get married. It was years away, but Isaac felt the certainty of it deep inside. He couldn't really imagine what their wedding would look like, though. A thought struck him. "Do you think when we get back we could try a new church? We've both avoided thinking about it the last few months. I felt like there was so much going on, and…" He cupped David's face.

"What?" David rubbed his rough cheek against Isaac's hand.

"When I thought about going to church, I remembered what the

Bible says about men lying with men. About us going to hell. But now we know we're not. I want to be close to God again."

David nodded. "When I thought about it before I'd have that panicky feeling. But now it doesn't come."

"I feel God's love again. It's not about a book full of rules. There are churches in San Francisco that will accept us."

"Yes. Let's find a new church." He kissed Isaac and then groaned. "I guess we should get up now."

"Soon." Isaac drew his leg higher over David's thigh.

"Mmm." David raised an eyebrow. "Did you have something in mind?"

"Always." Isaac rolled David onto his back. "I'll do the work. Okay?"

Lips parted, David spread his legs. "Anything."

"Anything?" he teased.

But David only nodded seriously, and Isaac kissed and kissed him, his heart so wonderfully full. They were both smiling as he gave his attention to all of David's body—sucking his nipples and nuzzling his inner thighs, licking the hollow of his throat, and stroking down to the sensitive soles of his feet.

Their smiles faded as he lapped at David's heavy balls, pressing his face to the wiry hair there and skating his finger around David's hole. When he took David's swelling shaft into his mouth, David thrust up with his hips, biting back a whimper. Isaac watched him through his eyelashes, loving how David's head was thrown back, his eyes closed as he panted.

David's thighs trembled, and Isaac was tempted to finish him with his mouth. But his own cock throbbed, and he wanted to sink into David and be part of him. Lose himself in him. He pulled back, a line of saliva hanging from his mouth to the head of David's cock.

"Oh," David murmured. "So pretty."

Isaac looked up to find him watching, and he blushed as he fumbled for the little jar of petroleum jelly. David was splayed open, boneless as Isaac pushed a slick finger into him. He was tight and hot, gripping Isaac's finger, and Isaac stretched him as slowly as he could bear until David was red and arching up his ass.

"Please, Isaac."

The temptation to tease vanished as David lifted his knees to his shoulders and opened himself as much as he could, completely exposed and trusting, looking at Isaac with such love and need. Dizzy desire had Isaac slathering his cock with the jelly and slamming straight into David in one thrust even though he'd planned to go slow. They both gasped, and Isaac saw stars as David's incredible heat clenched around him. He was about to stammer out an apology for

going too fast, but the words died on his tongue as David squeezed around him.

"More. Eechel, please, more."

Bracing himself with one hand on David's shoulder and the other holding open his thigh, Isaac fucked him with short, choppy strokes. They panted and grunted softly, and along with the tang of sex and sweat, he smelled the sweet hint of June's chocolate chip pancakes. David's eyes opened and closed, and he rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. "Is it too much?" Isaac asked.

Eyes wild, David focused on him. "Don't stop. Don't stop." He was leaking between them, and he reached down to stroke himself.

"Uh-uh. I'll do the work, remember?" Isaac drew David's arm over his head, and then grabbed the other for good measure, holding David's wrists in one hand awkwardly. David's eyes widened, and Isaac was about to let go when David shuddered and squeezed Isaac's cock inside him, moaning low in his throat.

"Yes. Like that."

David's excitement sparked in Isaac, and he drove into him, their skin slapping together, breath harsh in the silence. He gripped David's wrists, keeping his arms locked above him, and even though David was stronger and could get free if he wanted, Isaac hummed with the thrill of David's acquiescence and trust.

Isaac wanted to scream and shout, but he couldn't in June's house with the others right downstairs having pancakes. The pressure was building, and he groaned. "David. You feel so good. Just for me. My good boy."

David's cry echoed, and Isaac slapped his hand over David's mouth. David's breath came in wet gusts against Isaac's palm, his nostrils flaring, and it seemed to spur him on. Isaac still held David's arms up over his head with his other hand, and he rammed his hips, smothering David's scream as David splashed between them, squeezing down like a vise on Isaac as he came.

Isaac's fingers dug into David's wrists, and he was so close as he watched David spill. After a few more pumps, Isaac emptied inside him, the pleasure burning as he shook and gasped. *Mine.* Isaac spurted a last time and dropped his head, and they shivered together, sweaty and sticky. When Isaac let go of David's wrists and lowered his hand from David's mouth, they stared at each other, chests heaving.

"You liked it like that?" Isaac's throat was dry.

Fresh blood colored David's cheeks. He nodded. "Did you?"

"It was okay, I guess."

After a moment, David burst out laughing, and Isaac grinned and kissed the end of his nose. "Now let's have a shower and get some pancakes before they're all gone."

"We're going to hold you to that, June. You're coming to visit us in San Francisco this summer—no ifs, ands, or buts." Jen hugged June tightly by the rental car. "That extra guest room is screaming out for a visitor."

A twinkle in her eye, June raised her hand in a salute. "Aye-aye, captain." She hugged Aaron gingerly. "You follow doctor's orders now. And by doctor of course I mean your wife."

Aaron chuckled. "Always. I'm feeling much better. Your pancakes every morning are the best medicine. Maybe you can give Jen the recipe."

"Isn't he adorable, thinking he can get me to cook? In the morning, no less? Darling, I love your optimism." Jen patted Aaron's cheek.

June turned to Isaac and David. "Remember I'm only a phone call or email away."

Isaac nodded. "Thank you. And you really do have to visit." He hesitated. It was still an odd thing to hug grown women like this, but he opened his arms and she gave him a squeeze. She smelled like lavender and flour.

"Now David, I expect a weekly update." June gave him a stern look.

"Yes, ma'am." David swallowed hard. "I…thank you. For everything. I don't know what I would have done without you before, and the past couple weeks you've been so generous to us all, driving us around and feeding us. Thank you. It doesn't seem like enough to say that."

June smiled tightly, her voice thick. "Oh, my boy, it's enough. More than." She held him close.

"Goodbye." David's voice was muffled in her shoulder where he bent his head.

"Just for now. More like a see you soon." June rubbed his back and stepped away, waving her hand. "Shoo now before you make me cry. Have a safe trip home."

They'd piled their bags in the trunk already, and Jen got behind the wheel. June stood in her driveway and waved, and Isaac and David waved back through the rear window until she was out of sight around a bend.

Jen kept up a patter of talk about nothing in particular on the way to the hospital, and Isaac was grateful. He, Aaron, and David all seemed lost in their thoughts until Jen said, "Uh-oh. I think I took a wrong turn. Sorry."

Isaac peered out the window, and his breath caught as they passed a familiar field. "David, look."

The Sky-Vu was still closed for winter, its white screen lonely without rows of cars in front of it, and the concrete rectangle of a snack bar looking dingy. But Isaac smiled as he read the big black letters on a white sign by the entrance.

Opening Soon in May for Another Season of Movies and Friends

"That's a good place." David looked back through the window wistfully.

"Our very first date." Isaac laughed. "It all seemed so glamorous."

Tangling their fingers together, David smiled. "It was. Zebulon glamour."

"What movie did you see?" Jen asked.

They talked about movies and nothing important as she got back on the right road, and Isaac could breathe a little deeper when they reached the hospital's now-familiar parking lot.

"Ready, gang?" Jen asked. "We're in the home stretch. Let's do this." She climbed out, and they followed, letting her lead the way.

In his bed, Nathan smiled wanly, his head completely bald now. But his skin had more color than the day before. "Mother and Father said I can write to you. Will you write back?" Nathan asked.

"Of course." Isaac reached for Nathan's hand. "Of course I will."

Nathan looked to Aaron. "I know I'm not supposed to talk to you, but thank you. I feel better already. They said they think it's working. Maybe God doesn't want me in heaven yet after all."

Aaron smiled softly. "I sure hope not."

"I wish we could stay." Isaac squeezed Nathan's fingers. "We'll still be here with you in our thoughts."

"I know. You have to get back to the world." He lowered his voice. "I'd want to get the heck away from here too."

Isaac had to laugh. "You will. Soon you'll be home again. I know it. I'll pray for you, Nathan. Every single day."

"Do you still pray out there?"

Isaac knew Aaron didn't, but he answered for himself. "Not as much as I should, but that's going to change."

Danielle appeared in the doorway. "Hey, guys. Better wrap this up. Too many people in here at once. Gotta let Nathan get his beauty rest. But I'll be in touch with you soon, okay? Keep you up to date."

After more goodbyes, Isaac turned at the door and gave Nathan a final smile. *Please let him live. Please let me see him again.* Then he was walking, and they were almost at the elevator, and David held his hand. Jen looped an arm around Aaron's waist, and he kissed her head.

Isaac's steps slowed. "They really aren't coming, are they? Our parents aren't coming to say goodbye."

David smiled sadly. "It doesn't seem like it. I suppose they've said

everything there is to say. What more is there?"

"Yeah. I think they've said it all." Aaron tried to smile. "We know how they feel, and they know how we feel. All we can do is accept it. I'm trying to, at least. And we've done what we came here to do. We helped Nathan."

"You did. *You* saved him," Isaac said.

Aaron shook his head. "He's not saved yet."

"But if he lives, it'll be because of you," David said. "You should be proud. We're proud of you."

Aaron smiled for real this time. "Thank you."

"Maybe this is their way of letting you all go," Jen added quietly. "By not coming to try and convince you to change. Maybe this is the best way they can accept you."

"Letting us go," Isaac repeated. "Maybe it is." He breathed deeply. "Let's go home."

Aaron nodded. "God, let's. Let's get back to our lives."

"Aaron!" Danielle called. They turned to find her hurrying down the hall carrying something square wrapped in a white cloth. "I almost forgot—your mother left this for you."

"For me?" Aaron shook his head. "You must be mistaken."

Danielle held it out. "Nope. It's definitely for you, and whatever it is, it smells delicious. So you'd better take it, or I'll gobble it up. Take care, you guys."

Aaron took it from her. "I… Thank you."

As Danielle left with a wave, Aaron stared at the package in his hands. He slowly unwrapped the white cloth to reveal a baking dish full of pasta. His breath caught. "Butter noodles. My favorite." Tears sprang to his eyes.

Isaac had to blink back his own tears, and so did David and Jen. They all stood there in the hall staring at the food.

Jen wiped her eyes. "There's a microwave in the cafeteria. Come on."

So they found a table downstairs, and Aaron got four forks. They shared the meal right out of the baking dish, savoring the buttery noodles with a hint of parsley—Mother's secret ingredient.

#

Isaac blinked to attention as Jen pulled up outside a large building that was not the airport. He'd been leaning against David's shoulder and tracing patterns on his palm in the backseat, and now he sat up straighter. "Where are we?"

David cleared his throat. "I thought you might like to go the long way."

"The bus again?" Isaac wrinkled his nose. "Flying was weird, but it was way less gross." Then it hit him, and his pulse galloped. "Is this

the train station?" From the front seat, Jen and Aaron grinned back at him.

"Yep." David smiled. "We had to take the bus last time, but I thought we could do it properly now. The way you always dreamed of."

Isaac couldn't speak, and his mind whirled.

David's face fell. "But if you don't want to, I'm sure we can get on a flight. Maybe not tonight, but tomorrow. We can—"

"No." He gripped David's hand. "This is good. Thank you."

"All right, get out of here," Jen said. "We'll see you boys in a few days."

"Have fun." Aaron ruffled Isaac's hair playfully. "Don't do anything we wouldn't do."

"Considering we fall asleep by nine p.m. after watching *NCIS: Wherever* most nights I'm home, I think you're good to go." Jen grinned.

Isaac unbuckled and leaned over the seat to give them an awkward hug. "Thank you. I…"

"We know." Aaron nodded to the station. "Now go catch your train, brother."

They did, in a bustle of activity inside the train station with people darting here and there dragging wheeled suitcases. They still had June's little purple case, which she'd insisted they keep, and he followed as David read the signs and found the right track. It was the first time Isaac had seen him take the lead doing something worldly, and he puffed up with pride.

We're going to be okay.

They waited on the platform, and Isaac thought he might bounce out of his skin as the train appeared in the distance, its big white headlight beaming like the freight trains he remembered. Isaac could have leapt on board in a single bound, and David laughed with delight.

Of course David gave him the window seat, and as the train rolled out of Minneapolis, Isaac pressed his face to the glass. He loved the gentle sway of the car and the hum of the engine, and David beside him with their fingers entwined.

"Sorry you can't ride on top like you used to imagine," David murmured. "With the wind in your hair. I asked, but they don't allow it."

Isaac chuckled. The seats were like on the bus, rows of two seats facing the same way. There were people all around, so Isaac kept his voice low too. "This is just as good." *I'm on a train. A real-life train.* He'd ridden the BART in San Francisco, but it wasn't the same.

"Just wait. It'll get better."

Isaac turned away from the window. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.” David was clearly trying not to smile.

When they reached Omaha five hours later, Isaac found out. He followed as they climbed down from the car and David asked someone where to go for the California Zephyr. It was almost eleven o’clock when the new train arrived. Isaac squinted down the track as it pulled in, his heart thumping. It was bigger than the other train, with two levels. “What’s a zephyr?”

“I have no idea, but the internet said this is one of the best train rides to take.” David grinned. “It sounds really pretty. I think you’ll like it. I think I will too.”

They climbed on board, and David peered at their tickets, which he said he’d printed himself at June’s on white paper. A man in a navy uniform pointed them up the stairs nearby, and the butterflies were back in Isaac’s stomach, but in the best way. There were doors all along the passageway upstairs, and David stopped in front of one. “I think this is it.”

Isaac frowned. “What do you mean?”

A woman in navy appeared. She smiled widely. “You’re in this roomette?” David showed her their tickets. “Yes, here you are. Have you ridden with us before?”

“No. Only just now to get to Omaha,” David answered.

She smiled again. “I’m Monica, and I’ll answer any questions you have. Let me show you the features of your roomette.” She slid open the door.

Isaac bit back a gasp. “Is this *ours*?”

Monica nodded. “All yours! You can see the picture window—just wait until we hit the Rockies—you won’t believe the view. Now your two seats here facing each other convert into a bed, and there’s an upper berth that folds down from up here.” She pointed as she spoke. “Your restroom and showers are just down the hall, and you’ve got climate control, electrical outlets, reading lights, towels, and bed linens.”

As Monica went over all the features, Isaac could only stare, barely hearing her. He and David were taking a train all the way to California, and they had *their own room.*

“There’s bottled water there, and let me know if you need anything else. Would you like turn-down service?”

“Uh…” David glanced at Isaac, who had no idea what that meant. “I think we’re fine. Thank you.”

“Enjoy your trip. Sleep well, gentlemen.”

There was barely room for both of them to stand once they closed the door behind them, but Isaac didn’t care if it was tiny. It was *theirs.* He threw himself into David’s arms. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” David kissed his cheek. “I know it’ll take longer, but after Zebulon…I thought it would be nice. Just you and me for a little while.”

“More than nice.” The train started moving, and Isaac didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or shout. “It’s perfect.” He went to the window, but could only see their reflection.

“Here.” David flicked off the light.

In the darkness, the lights of Omaha soon gave way to the plains of Nebraska. Under the gleam of the moon, the land stretched out flat as far as Isaac could see. They unfolded the seats into a narrow bed, not bothering with the one above. It didn’t matter if there was hardly any room—no way were they sleeping separately.

In their pajamas after midnight, they knelt on the bed at the window shoulder to shoulder and watched the world go by. They couldn’t hear any other passengers, and the only sound was the low growl of the wheels on the track and the whistle blowing every so often. It sent a shiver down Isaac’s spine. He could almost believe he and David were alone on the train, and that this was all for them.

He whispered, “I can’t wait to see the mountains.”

“And the ocean again. Isaac, let’s see everything. Let’s ride all the trains.”

Isaac tore his gaze from the window and watched David—beautiful and brave, and *his*. David smiled at him in the moonlight. They kissed softly and turned back to the world and the way home.

Epilogue

David was puffing by the time he reached the top of the hill at Bernal Heights Park, glad that the sun was hidden behind a cluster of clouds in the blue sky. The grass was brown now at the end of August, but dogs still raced around with their owners nearby. As he reached the fence surrounding the radio tower, he passed a clump of teenagers smoking something sweet and cloying that he didn't think was a cigarette. A path wrapped around the fence, and David smiled as he remembered the first time he and Isaac had walked all the way around, marveling at the three hundred and sixty degree view of the city.

Isaac sat waiting on the ocean side, of course. His legs were tanned under his shorts, and he had his pocketknife out. He carved a thick twig with a little smile playing on his lips. For a moment, David just watched, smiling himself.

He plopped down beside Isaac on the side of the hill, kissing him lightly and hardly even thinking about other people being around to see them. They could even kiss at *church* if they wanted. Not that they ever did, but they could.

"Hey." Isaac slipped the knife away, and glanced at his phone before putting it in his pocket as well. "Chris says hi, and that he's going to kick your butt at that new soccer game at Lola's Sunday night."

David laughed. "Undoubtedly. He's way better at video games than I am." He took the twig from Isaac, its bark almost gone. "What's this going to be?"

"I don't know. A snake maybe. Not enough wood for much more. Was Reverend Albert happy with the new pews?"

"Yes. I know you'll see them on Sunday, but I took a picture." David pulled out his phone and tapped in his secret code. He held up the screen so Isaac could see.

"They look amazing! Everyone's going to want to sit on that side."

David couldn't help but beam. "I hope they can raise the money soon to do the other half. They're so old and creaky. Reverend Albert tried to pay me again. I took a little so he'd feel better." The Unitarians had welcomed David and Isaac with open arms, and David had never looked so forward to church. No more four hours of dreary German hymns and sermons. They actually laughed in services now. They had new friends, and went for brunch some Sundays. David sipped mimosas and never felt the need to gulp.

"Are you starting on the desk for Clark's boss next? I thought we could work on it together tomorrow morning before Jen's surprise

party at Flanagan's."

"I'd like that." David wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his T-shirt.

Isaac chuckled. "Aaron said Clark's making the cake I like. With the cream cheese? I told him I forgive him now too, but I'm not sure he believes me yet. But I get cake, so that's okay."

"It's…what do they call it? Win-win?"

"Yes. And Jen's mom is bringing chicken adobo."

David groaned. "So delicious. Gary's ribs are the best too. And those wings we had that time—the boneless ones? I'm hungry just thinking about it." He picked up one of the little stones by his feet and tossed it down the hill. Below them was Bernal Heights with its narrow streets and houses packed together. He imagined he could see the roof of Jen and Aaron's townhouse, even though there was no way to tell which one it was.

"So, Danielle left me a message while I was in class."

David sucked in a breath. "And?" Surely Isaac would have told him right away if it was bad news?

"Nathan's cancer-free. His hair has almost all grown back and he looks Amish again. He says hi."

"That's amazing!" David wanted to whoop for joy.

"I know." Isaac's smile faded. "She won't see him anymore unless he gets sick again. But I hope Mother and Father will still let him write me back like they promised."

"I'm sure they will." David ran his hand over Isaac's thigh. "Any word about Ephraim?"

"He hasn't left the last June heard. But I got a letter from Mervin. It was short, but he seems good. Still planning on marrying Sadie after harvest. He said his brother's definitely asking Mary soon too. They're going steady now."

"Good. Maybe Mary will write again soon with her happy news." Her only letter had spoken of mundane things like Eli splitting his pants during a barn raising and Sarah learning how to write her cursive alphabet. But that she'd written—and addressed the letter to both he and Isaac—was something he held close to his heart.

He and Isaac leaned together quietly for a little while as the sun danced with the clouds.

Isaac sat up straighter. "Oh, did you see the message Anna sent on Facebook? The Parkers are letting her have the afternoon off to come to Jen's party tomorrow."

Warmth bloomed in David's chest. "Good. It's been two weeks. I miss her. That's kind of them."

"They said she's the greatest live-in nanny and housekeeper they've ever had, and an extra afternoon is the least they can do.

According to Anna, anyway."

David laughed. "Not that she's biased."

"Not at all," Isaac agreed.

"I saw a boy talking to her on one of her posts. I wonder if she'll bring him to the party."

Isaac elbowed him playfully. "You'll have to put on your disapproving big brother face and scare him." Then he sighed and grew serious. "I wish Ephraim had come with her."

"I know. For your sake, and hers. I think he broke her heart a little in the end."

"I think so. He doesn't seem to know what he wants yet. I suppose it's good he's not rushing. I think he might stay after all. Or go back to Red Hills. I should be glad that Anna's talking to boys. Although I admit part of me was hoping they'd both move here and end up getting married and having babies so we could be uncles."

"They still might. That would be nice, wouldn't it? I miss having kids around." With a pang, he thought of Sarah, and her face pressed to the window as he'd left, Elizabeth and Rebecca close behind her.

"Me too. I hope Aaron and Jen don't wait too much longer."

David watched the silent jumble of streets and buildings, the cars and invisible people going about their distant business. "I like the city from up here. It's quiet. All the noise blends together until it's peaceful somehow. Almost like the country." He closed his eyes as the sun peeked out. Isaac's bare arm brushed against his, and David inhaled deeply. It had a been a long week of hard work, and he looked forward to the weekend. He had the desk to make, but with Isaac helping it would hardly seem like work at all.

"I've been thinking."

David cracked one eye open. "Uh-oh."

Isaac nudged him, laughing. "I was thinking…" He took a breath. "I was thinking that maybe next year, when we've saved enough money, we could get our own place."

David's heart jumped and he peered closely at Isaac. "Really?"

"Yeah. Aaron and Jen still won't take rent from us, and I thought if we continue saving, and I helped you with work every chance I can, we could find somewhere just for us."

"You're already working a lot more. What about school?" *Don't get excited yet. Don't get excited.* His breath was already coming faster.

"Summer school helped me so much. I don't feel like I'm so behind now. With both of us working on your orders, think of how much faster we can save. I'll still need time for homework and classes, but it won't be as intensive as it has been. That's the word Mr. Silverstein used. It won't be as hard." Biting his lip, he hesitated. "Wouldn't you like to live together without anyone else?"

“Of course.” David smiled as he considered it. Their own home. “We could build all-new furniture. Our bed, like we talked about. And a dining table. We could cook more, even.”

Isaac licked his lips, nodding excitedly. “A place with a garage, so you wouldn’t have to work in that shoe box with Alan’s rapper music next door.”

“I’m used to it now. Mostly.”

“But you deserve your own space. The way you like it.”

David wrapped his arm around Isaac’s shoulders. “Thank you. But we can’t afford anything like that in the city. Definitely not with a garage.”

“I was thinking we could go out of the city.”

David blinked, afraid to believe it. “But what about school?”

“We could move out of the city somewhere a little more peaceful, but close enough to the BART. It wouldn’t be the country, not yet. But we could have a bit more space and quiet.”

“Well…” His heart thumped. He hadn’t thought they’d be able to move for years.

Isaac gave him what Jen had dubbed his “bitch, please” expression: lips flattened into a line, his chin down, and an eyebrow raised.

“Okay, yes. Definitely. But you’d have to take the train in and back every day. It would take a long time.” Still, excitement prickled David’s skin.

“What a chore to take the train every day. Boo hoo, poor me.” Isaac grinned. “It would be the best of both worlds. You could have your own workshop in our garage, and we’d have a place. We’d have to rent something at first, and it wouldn’t be big, but it would be ours. It’s great living with Aaron and Jen, but…wouldn’t that be nice? Our own house?” Isaac ran his hand over David’s thigh.

Nodding, David wanted to stand up and shout for joy, but he knew they shouldn’t get ahead of themselves. “But I don’t know when we’ll have the money.”

“I actually went to see Logan at his office yesterday. You know, Clark and Dylan’s friend who does the financial stuff? Obviously he wants to meet with both of us, but he said he would help us make a financial plan. With a budget and goals for how much we should save every month. I think it’ll be good to have a plan all written down. There can be little colored charts too.” He laughed. “It’s silly, but it makes it seem more official.”

“A plan.” David mulled it over. “I like that. And if we can’t afford it this year, maybe next. It’s not that long. You’ll be ready to go to college.”

Isaac nodded enthusiastically. “Aaron thinks I might get one of

those scholarships if I do well on my SATs. He says I have a good story."

David found himself smiling, and he kissed Isaac soundly. "It *is* a good story. It's my favorite, in fact." He rolled around the idea. *Our own home.* Then another thought flickered through David's mind. *Maybe one day we'll be fathers. Maybe we can have a family that would be just ours.*

It would be years before that could happen, but the idea took root in him, burrowing deep. He kissed Isaac's cheek. "I think it's a good plan, Eechel."

Isaac beamed. "It'll be hard work, but we can do it."

"We can." David wasn't sure why he felt so certain, but he did. They could do it. They *would* do it. "How about tonight? What should we do?"

"I don't know." Isaac leaned into him with a contented sigh and took his hand, playing with his fingers. "Do you want to stay here for a while?"

David did, and they watched a ship at sea powering over the waves, smaller and smaller as it sailed beyond the harbor for the horizon.

THE END